

# Unlocking the Benefits of Diversity

## *All-Inclusive Multiculturalism and Positive Organizational Change*

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As the demographic composition of organizations in the United States rapidly shifts, such that minority groups are becoming the numerical and economic majority, organizations are grappling with ways to manage diversity in the workplace. The two forms of diversity initiatives most frequently implemented in organizations—colorblindness and multiculturalism—have clear benefits; however, each also contributes to feelings of exclusion by different organizational members. In this article, the authors describe problematic issues raised by these two approaches to diversity and offer an alternative perspective—all-inclusive multiculturalism, or the AIM model. The authors posit that AIM serves as a catalyst for positive and effective organizational change through the development of social capital and positive relationships at work and enables organizational members to grow to their fullest potential.

**Keywords:** *multiculturalism; colorblindness; organizational change; diversity; inclusion*

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**T**he U.S. workforce, owing to the steady increase of demographic minority entrants, is in a rapid state of change. Populations typically underrepresented in organizations, particularly ethnic minorities and women, have become an integral

part of the workforce.<sup>1</sup> Leveraging this diversity has important implications for the promotion of positive organizational change through its facilitation of both individual and organizational performance (e.g., Brief, 2008; Earley & Mosakowski, 2000; Williams & O'Reilly, 1998). The need to create organizational environments receptive to diversity is therefore greater than ever. We argue that workforce diversity—if approached in a way that maximizes inclusion and minimizes resistance—presents organizations with opportunities to create change that fosters the positive human potential of their employees.

Numerous organizations have recognized and attempted to respond effectively to the demographic shifts in the workforce by launching diversity initiatives, hiring diversity consultants, and offering an array of diversity training programs (Kalev, Dobbin, & Kelly, 2006). A similar focus on these demographic trends and their implications for organizations is found among academic researchers, as seen in more than 450 articles on “diversity in the workplace” just since 2000. Scholars and practitioners have not, however, reflected sufficiently on whether—and to what extent how—organizational approaches to diversity promote employee receptivity to these initiatives. We posit that this lack of critical reflection has curtailed the effectiveness of diversity efforts. The current article complements and extends existing theory on how organizations manage demographic diversity in an effort to gain competitive advantage (e.g., Richard, 2000; Wright, Ferris, Hiller, & Kroll, 1995), specifically through their attempts to foster positive organizational change. We do so by reexamining fundamental cultural assumptions within organizations about how best to create a positive climate at work (Cameron, Dutton, & Quinn, 2003; Dutton & Ragins, 2006; Gittell, Cameron, Lim, & Rivas, 2006), particularly by drawing on diversity as a resource (Ely & Thomas, 2001).

In contrast with a problem-focused approach (typical of organizational development and change initiatives), viewing diversity as an opportunity rather than as a threat creates possibilities for increased organizational understanding (e.g., Jackson & Dutton, 1988) and positive, organization-wide change (Cooperrider & Sekerka, 2003). The current article focuses on the potential of workplace diversity as a catalyst for *positive organizational change*, a broad concept that includes analyzing and exemplifying instances of positive deviance (e.g., Cameron et al., 2003; Spreitzer & Sonenshein, 2003), virtuousness (e.g., Cameron, 2003) and endorsing an affirmative

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bias, or strengths-based orientation (e.g., Cameron et al., 2003; Clifton & Harter, 2003). We articulate a new organizational premise that heightens the potential for diversity to provide fertile ground for organizational change. Specifically, we explicitly address aspects of diversity as a “positive core” of organizational life—a key component of positive change (Cooperrider & Sekerka, 2003). In doing so, we explicate how, if approached inclusively, diversity creates a context in which individuals can create high-quality relationships across difference (Davidson & James, 2006) and approach the best of the human condition.

In the current article, we discuss the two dominant approaches used by organizations attempting to change their climate surrounding diversity—colorblindness and multiculturalism—and how well these approaches address the unique needs of both minorities and nonminorities to affiliate with the organization.<sup>2</sup> In doing so, we briefly review extant research concerning diversity in the workplace as well as the benefits and limitations of the colorblind and multicultural approaches. We also discuss the implications of these two diversity perspectives for organizational functioning and for the individuals embedded within these organizations. Our discussion reveals a stark fundamental paradox in these two approaches that appears to limit their effectiveness. To reconcile the limitations of both the colorblind and multicultural approaches to diversity, we introduce a novel approach to managing organizational diversity—what we refer to as *all-inclusive multiculturalism* (AIM). As we describe in the following, this approach offers organizations a way to overcome the limitations of the colorblind and traditional multicultural ideologies by cultivating feelings of employee inclusion and thus provides a starting point for positive organizational change. Finally, we discuss implications for practice and describe a specific empirical agenda intended for future research.

## DIVERSITY IN ORGANIZATIONS

Research over the past 50 years has shown little consensus about what constitutes diversity or how it affects organizational processes and outcomes (for a review, see Williams & O'Reilly, 1998). A common definition of diversity refers to the degree to which a workgroup or organization is heterogeneous with respect to personal and functional attributes (Jehn, Northcraft, & Neale, 1999). The extant literature on organizational diversity has produced inconsistent results on effects of diversity, with some researchers finding beneficial effects, such as increased creativity, productivity, and quality (e.g., Earley & Mosakowski, 2000; Ely & Thomas, 2001; Polzer, Milton, & Swann, 2002; Swann, Kwan, Polzer, & Milton, 2003; Watson, Kumar, & Michaelsen, 1993), and others finding a detrimental influence on organizational outcomes—particularly through process losses, increases in conflict, decreases in social integration, and inhibition of decision-making and change processes (e.g., Chatman, Polzer, Barsade, & Neale, 1998; Jehn et al., 1999; Morrison & Milliken, 2000; Westphal & Milton, 2000; for a review, see Mannix & Neale, 2006). Following from such inconsistencies, diversity has been dubbed a “double-edged sword” for organizations (Williams & O'Reilly, 1998).

In our discussion of diversity, we focus on the distribution of race and ethnicity among interdependent members of a work unit (Jackson, Joshi, & Erhardt, 2003; Pelled, Eisenhardt, & Xin, 1999),<sup>3</sup> whether a work group, department, or organization. In doing so, some of the heretofore mixed results of workplace diversity and its influence on organizational functioning are resolved. Specifically, the current article focuses on ways in which racial and ethnic diversity can be drawn on as a resource for building on employees' strengths; cultivating a climate that fosters respect, compassion, and openness; and ultimately, gaining a competitive advantage through generating feelings of inclusion of both minority and nonminority employees.

Previous research has emphasized how individuals utilize social categorizations based on demographic differences to make sense of their diverse environments (e.g., Hogg & Terry, 2000; Polzer et al., 2002), which in turn undercut social cohesion and integration and leads to dysfunctional conflict (Polzer et al., 2002). Creating a positive diverse work environment is indeed quite challenging, but organizations need not be at the mercy of changes in the demographic composition of the workforce and the conflict that often accompanies these changes. Rather, in line with a strengths-based approach (Clifton & Harter, 2003), organizations can take charge by creating an environment conducive to embracing and fostering the benefits of such diversity, starting with the implementation and subsequent institutionalization of best practices that center on the self-affirmation and inclusion of all employees. Specifically, by creating a backdrop against which interracial interactions are interpreted as opportunities for learning, as opposed to being tense and filled with discord, employees have the chance to build supportive, enduring, and resilient relationships (e.g., Davidson & James, 2006). We posit that by fostering such relationships, an all-inclusive work environment promotes individual thriving, defined as "a sense of progress or forward movement in one's self development" and comprised of two dimensions of personal growth—learning and vitality (Spreitzer, Sutcliffe, Dutton, Sonenshein, & Grant, 2005, p. 538).

### **Diversity Approaches and Initiatives**

Organizations cultivate and manage diversity in a variety of ways. Many organizations institute daily practices that demonstrate their commitment to fostering diversity at work through a series of what can be referred to as "diversity initiatives," whereas other companies eschew these multicultural initiatives in favor of a "colorblind" approach to diversity.<sup>4</sup>

*The colorblind approach.* The colorblind approach to organizational diversity is intertwined with American cultural ideals of individualism, equality, meritocracy, assimilation, and "the melting pot" (Markus, Steele, & Steele, 2000; Plaut, 2002; D. A. Thomas & Ely, 1996; M. Thomas, Mack, & Montagliani, 2004) and focuses on ignoring cultural group identities or realigning them with an overarching identity (Hogg & Terry, 2000). This "realignment" is achieved by placing emphasis on a superordinate goal or identity, such as a common affiliation with the broader organization, which typically increases an individual's organizational identity while decreasing the

salience of individual differences (Chatman & Flynn, 2001). For example, an organization can structure rewards that foster greater nonminority-minority collaboration, bringing important deep-level characteristics to the foreground while pushing demographic differences, such as racial and ethnic diversity, to the background (Harrison, Price, & Bell, 1998). The irony in this practice is that diverse employees are discouraged from acting and thinking in the unique ways associated with their social categories, which does not allow them to utilize fully the viewpoints of their distinctive social group memberships.

The colorblind approach appears as a dominant model for diversity in mainstream American culture and organizations (Plaut & Markus, 2007; D. A. Thomas & Ely, 1996). This approach stresses individual accomplishments and qualifications over any other factor, such as diversity, and preserves the preference for unity and cohesion. Nonminorities who believe strongly in individual merit or have a high need to belong are likely to identify highly with an organization that espouses colorblindness (Plaut, Sanchez-Burks, Buffardi, & Stevens, 2007). In turn, these individuals are more likely to remain with the organization once employed as their identification with the organization's approach to diversity grows into identification with the organization as a whole (e.g., Dutton, Dukerich, & Harquail, 1994).

Although the colorblind perspective in principle is grounded in the ideals of meritocracy and equality—in essence, “treating all people the same” (Plaut, 2002)—evidence suggests that this approach is commonly interpreted by minorities as neither colorblind nor color neutral but rather as exclusionary (Markus et al., 2000). Members of the majority group typically endorse a colorblind approach to diversity because it is perceived as more inclusive of their group; minorities on the other hand distrust colorblind initiatives because they are perceived as being exclusive of their group. Moreover, minority distrust of colorblind ideals is exacerbated in cases where organizations do not appear to be especially diverse in the first place (Purdie-Vaughns, Steele, Davies, & Crosby, 2006). Within organizations perceived to ignore or devalue racial differences, frustration, dissatisfaction, and conflict will likely ensue, particularly for minority members high in racial identity (Chrobot-Mason & Thomas, 2002). These negative effects on organizational attachment are not surprising given that a colorblind perspective is also associated with higher levels of racial bias (Richeson & Nussbaum, 2004) and a tendency to ignore processes that perpetuate differential outcomes for nonminority and minority groups (Schofield, 1986). A colorblind perspective does not reliably indicate a prejudicial organizational stance but rather, may reflect an attempt by the organization to frame their diversity practices using an ideology that has traditionally appealed to nonminority groups. Although a colorblind ideology may appeal to nonminorities, this approach to diversity also may alienate minority employees and allow a culture of racism to develop (Bonilla-Silva, 2003).

*The multicultural approach.* The multicultural approach to diversity emphasizes the benefits of a diverse workforce and explicitly recognizes employee differences as a source of strength (Cox, 1991). Organizations promoting initiatives premised on a multicultural ideology are particularly attractive to minorities because diverse

backgrounds are recognized as being different, and group identities, such as race, ethnicity, and religious affiliation, are retained and acknowledged (e.g., Plaut & Markus, 2007; Purdie-Vaughns et al., 2006; Verkuyten, 2005). Organizations employ a variety of strategies to emphasize diversity. For example, multicultural initiatives range from networking and mentoring programs, which provide additional resources for demographically underrepresented groups of employees, to corporate “diversity days” where employees’ backgrounds are celebrated, diversity luncheons where food of different nations is served, and workshops or seminars that focus on aspects of diversity (e.g., Kidder, Lankau, Chrobot-Mason, Mollica, & Friedman, 2004; Linnehan & Konrad, 1999). Still, other companies may require—or strongly encourage—employees to attend diversity training, which is designed to diminish bias and increase cultural awareness among nonminority employees (Paluck, 2006).

Whereas multiculturalism should ideally foster a lasting organizational climate of inclusion and acceptance, multicultural diversity initiatives often fade, fall short of their goals, or fail completely because they are widely met by nonminorities with noncompliance and resistance (Brief et al., 2005; Kalev et al., 2006; Mannix & Neale, 2006; K. M. Thomas, 2008). Ironically, despite their overt attempt to foster inclusion in the workplace, multicultural initiatives can produce skepticism and resentment on the part of some groups—in particular nonminorities—who represent overlooked, yet critical, stakeholders in diversity issues (cf. James, Brief, Dietz, & Cohen, 2001). Many nonminority critiques of multiculturalism center on the claim that it excludes nonminorities and threatens unity (Plaut et al., 2007). This skepticism—perhaps even contempt—is echoed by Schlesinger’s (1992) commentary on multiculturalism:

“Multiculturalism” arises as a reaction against Anglo- or Eurocentrism, but at what point does it pass over into an ethnocentrism of its own? The very word, instead of referring as it should to all cultures, has come to refer only to non-Western, nonwhite cultures. . . . When does obsession with differences begin to threaten the idea of an overarching American nationality? (p. 74)

To the extent that nonminorities experience identity threats from multicultural initiatives (Verkuyten, 2005), they are likely to engage in identity management strategies, ranging from devaluing out-groups (i.e., resisting diversity) to reducing their motivation to identify and affiliate with an organization that supports multiculturalism. Indeed, efforts to enhance workplace diversity through a multicultural approach have generated significant backlash (Linnehan & Konrad, 1999). This backlash is manifested at the individual level in biased language, discrimination, silence regarding inequities, avoidance of difference, and discrediting of ideas and individuals and at the organizational level in discriminatory human resource policies and practices, cultures of silence, and delays in diversity initiatives (K. M. Thomas & Plaut, 2008).

Moreover, exposure to multicultural ideology is associated with cognitions and behaviors that could further prevent organizations from realizing the potential of diversity. For example, nonminorities exposed to a multicultural statement subsequently show more activation of stereotypes associated with minorities and also are more likely to use individuals’ category memberships, such as race, in making judgments

about them (e.g., Cox, 1993; Wolsko, Park, Judd, & Wittenbrink, 2000). The multicultural perspective seemingly triggers group-based processing among nonminorities, which, if not properly managed, could exacerbate existing prejudices in the workplace. Research also has shown that nonminorities support general equal employment opportunity (EEO) policies but oppose affirmative action (AA) practices that focus on specific demographic criteria, such as race, in human resources decision making (Kleugel, 1985).

More recently, James and colleagues (2001) found that as potential job applicants, nonminorities reported less positive attitudes toward promotion opportunities and less attraction to an organization when policies were specifically framed as benefiting minorities than when the policies were more generally framed. In a follow-up study, these researchers surveyed employees in a large communications company and found, once again, that nonminorities reported significantly less positive job-related attitudes when exposed to EEO/AA policies benefiting minorities. This is in stark comparison to the empirical research that shows consistent, positive relationships between minority attraction to organizations and a variety of techniques used by organizations to signal their value of diversity: recruiter characteristics, such as race (e.g., K. M. Thomas & Wise, 1999); diversity-related information portrayed in advertisements and brochures, such as EEO/AA policies (e.g., James et al., 2001); the representation of minorities within the organization (e.g., Avery, 2003; Perkins, Thomas, & Taylor, 2000); and the diversity initiative endorsed by the organization (Plaut et al., 2007).

### **THE AIM APPROACH: TOWARD AN ALL-INCLUSIVE WORKPLACE**

Our review shows that organizations are faced with a serious challenge in responding to the increasingly diverse nature of the workforce: Neither the colorblind nor the multicultural approach to organizational diversity is received by all employees as a positive affirmation of their belongingness in the organization (see Baumeister & Leary, 1995). Nonminorities feel excluded in organizations espousing a multicultural approach and feel more comfortable with a colorblind approach. For these employees, who interpret multicultural initiatives as applying only to minority group members, such initiatives pose a threat to their social identity (Verkuyten, 2005) and may decrease their desire to affiliate with the organization. The reverse pattern emerges among minorities, who experience exclusion in workplaces that espouse colorblindness. For organizations to bring their positive core to the forefront, thus stimulating positive change, they need an alternative approach to diversity that does not face resistance from either nonminority or minority organizational members.

We propose that an AIM approach meets this need, emphasizing that diversity includes *all* employees—that is, both minorities and nonminorities alike. On one hand, the AIM approach recognizes the importance of differences and acknowledges such differences, which is essential for gaining minority support. On the other hand, the AIM approach explicitly acknowledges the important role that nonminorities play

in workplace diversity, addressing their concerns of exclusion and disadvantage. Essentially, the AIM approach addresses deficiencies in the standard multicultural ideology without reverting to colorblindness. Whereas AIM acknowledges that the demographic groups to which people belong have important consequences for individuals, it also *explicitly* endorses this vision equally across members of *all* groups, including nonminorities. Given the pervasiveness of American values of equality and egalitarianism, which drive individualist ideology, this equal emphasis on groups is less of a mismatch for nonminorities. Moreover, AIM lifts perceived threats to unity that may form in reaction to multicultural policies (e.g., Schlesinger, 1992). Indeed, the AIM approach is consistent with approaches to intergroup relations that foster the maintenance of subgroup identities within the context of an overarching identity (see Hogg & Terry, 2000).

There is emerging empirical evidence of the positive effects that can be gained from this approach. For example, in our recent work, we and our colleagues (Plaut et al., 2007) had 35 nonminority undergraduate students participating for partial course credit (54% male; *M* age = 19.3 years) read a fictitious one-page newspaper article titled *Diversity Efforts Blanket Nation* about the spread of multiculturalism in corporations and universities across the United States. Participants randomly assigned to the control condition read this article, whereas participants assigned to the AIM condition read the same article with an additional paragraph describing multiculturalism as inclusive of everyone, including European Americans. Participants subsequently completed a computerized implicit association test (IAT) designed to gauge the strength of association of multiculturalism (vs. colorblindness) with exclusion (vs. inclusion). On the IAT, participants in the control condition showed significantly faster reaction times (i.e., stronger implicit associations) pairing multiculturalism with exclusion than multiculturalism with inclusion. This association, however, was absent for participants in the AIM condition. In short, by explicitly affirming the inclusion of nonminorities within a general multiculturalism ideology, the association of diversity with exclusion was significantly reduced. Notably, these findings further show that the perception that whites are included in multiculturalism were significantly stronger in the AIM condition (61%) than in the control condition (24%), but dropping participants who did not complete this manipulation check as expected did not alter the results. In other words, the power of the AIM manipulation operated implicitly, regardless of whether participants were able to explicitly report inclusion of their group.

The findings that associations of multiculturalism with exclusion were attenuated with the AIM model points to its potential to enhance, rather than impede, positive intergroup relationships, as well as individual and organizational performance. Previous research shows that social exclusion is linked to aggressive behavior and decrements in intelligent thought (Baumeister, Twenge, & Nuss, 2002; Twenge, Baumeister, Tice, & Stucke, 2001). Moreover, research on self-affirmation has shown that affirming the self decreases defensiveness and prejudice (see Sherman & Cohen, 2006). In terms of personal growth, workplaces that foster identity safety may give individuals a better chance to flourish (Markus et al., 2000). We propose that *only* an all-inclusive approach allows all groups to fully develop and maintain



identities that are either explicitly or implicitly important to them. To the extent that AIM policy helps diminish perceptions of social exclusion and affirms individuals' social identities, employee relationships with each other and with the organization should be strengthened.

*Proposition 1:* Implementing an AIM approach will promote a sense of inclusion among all employees and foster greater feelings of connectedness to one another, the organization, and its goals.

The AIM approach also helps organizations deal with the increasing complexity of a diverse workforce, including the challenge of how employees within diverse organizations interact with one another. Because organizations are increasingly diverse, social categorizations—for instance, along the lines of gender and race—become particularly salient in employees' daily interactions (Hogg & Terry, 2000). A key component in the creation of a truly inclusive climate is moving beyond surface-level tactics that display an appreciation of diversity and inspiring individuals to integrate diversity into their work lives through self- and other-appreciation within their organizational context (e.g., Davidson & James, 2006; D. A. Thomas & Ely, 1996). The foundation for developing an all-inclusive organization is in focusing on the formation of high-quality relationships among dissimilar others—that is, relationships that engender positive affect, encourage ongoing learning, are resilient, have longevity, and create “the capacity for individuals to engage, challenge, and support one another with clarity and confidence” (Davidson & James, 2006, p. 139).

With the AIM approach to diversity, employees are able to thrive and reach their fullest potential because there is a climate that encourages open communication and learning, affording individuals the opportunity to move past social categorizations and build mutually supportive and resilient relationships (Spreitzer et al., 2005). Such relationships are precluded in organizations with colorblind and multicultural diversity initiatives because of the feelings of exclusion engendered by each. Because the all-inclusive organization recognizes—and celebrates—the contextually salient identities of its employees, like race, opportunities for learning are created rather than squandered. By fostering an environment where individual differences are not ignored, as with the colorblind approach, or where feelings of inclusion are cultivated, in contrast with the exclusion of nonminorities engendered by multiculturalism, employees can engage each other in open, honest conversations about their differences. The AIM approach, through its facilitation of learning, promotes the formation of authentic relationships among diverse individuals and eschews the prejudice and stereotyping typically associated with diversity (e.g., Davidson & James, 2006; Wolsko et al., 2000).

*Proposition 2:* High-quality relationships will emerge within organizations that implement the AIM approach, as indicated by increased empathetic understanding of others, social and emotional support, and sharing of information.

## **Implementing AIM**

Practitioners and scholars alike have commonly espoused goals of greater diversity, yet neither have been able to unlock its potential benefits without being stymied

by its major drawbacks. We propose AIM as a way to benefit from organizational diversity as opposed to falling victim to its potential shortcomings, which has implications for practice and research. In this section, we address ways an AIM climate can be fostered in organizations and how this approach to diversity will likely influence organizational functioning, as well as individuals within the organization. We then suggest new avenues for research and theory building.

*Communication and language.* Creating an AIM workplace involves crafting environments that are considered more inclusive by all employees. Developing a climate of inclusion in which minorities and nonminorities feel like they belong can begin with communicating these changes to its internal and external constituents. Drawing on our research manipulating the inclusiveness of multiculturalism in newspaper articles (Plaut et al., 2007), we propose using AIM-based language in narratives about the organization's stance on diversity. For example, word choices in an organization's diversity materials (e.g., mission statement, corporate brochures, etc.) that communicate the inclusion of all employees in diversity initiatives indicate a potential ideological stance that appeals to minorities and nonminorities alike. By explicitly including nonminorities in the concept of diversity, this ideological perspective makes it clear that these groups will enjoy the same recognition and respect as minority groups.

Another example of AIM-based communication involves avoiding language that appears exclusive. Typically, soliciting employee participation for multicultural activities involves asking them to submit ethnic recipes, suggest resources for learning about a particular culture, or simply attend and enjoy multicultural festivities. To capitalize on an AIM approach, requests for participation might employ statements of inclusion to increase nonminority acceptance of the initiative. For example, when asking for recipes for a multicultural picnic or cookbook, the invitation might mention interest in "family recipes from all employees" rather than "ethnic recipes reflecting your heritage." This avoids the trap of nonminorities feeling excluded on the assumption that "ethnic" does not include them (e.g., Devos & Banaji, 2005). Relatedly, organizations using an AIM approach could avoid using words like *diverse* to refer to ethnic minorities and instead communicate that all employees are included in the term *diversity*.

Building on work by James et al. (2001) on the effects of framing policies as generally benefiting employees, we suggest that organizations use AIM when communicating organizational policies related to hiring, promotion, mentoring, and networking programs. In most cases, policies and initiatives can be framed as benefiting everyone, as opposed to just one group of people (e.g., women, blacks, gays, and lesbians). When a practice does not directly benefit everyone, employees can be reminded that such practices promote professionalism and collegiality and are part of a greater effort to create a far stronger workplace environment for everyone (see K. M. Thomas, 2005).

*Organizational structures and policies.* Cultivating an all-inclusive, multicultural workplace also requires organizations to "put their money where their mouth is"

and implement changes at the structural level (Kalev et al., 2006). For example, fostering both minority and nonminority leadership and involvement in diversity initiatives is fundamental to the AIM approach. Organizations can ensure that the unit responsible for diversity demographically reflects the inclusion they claim to promote. Diversity task forces, councils, and resource groups also should be comprised of minorities and nonminorities. Mentoring and social networking initiatives can practice AIM by including cross-race groupings (e.g., see Ragins, 1997, for an analysis of “diversified mentoring”). By-products of such efforts include not only career development benefits for protégés but also increased intercultural competence. Finally, organizations using AIM can design policies that not only purport to benefit all employees but actually do benefit all employees (see also Meyerson & Fletcher, 2000).

### **Proposed Benefits of AIM**

We propose that through the facilitation of high-quality relationships across difference, an AIM approach allows organizations to realize promised benefits of diversity. An AIM workplace approaches diversity in a way that decreases conflict and resistance by allowing nonminorities to feel included and respected while simultaneously fostering minorities’ feelings of inclusion and respect. By encouraging employees to feel included and valued, the AIM approach fosters organizational commitment and trust, internal motivation, and satisfaction for both minorities and nonminorities alike (Morrison & Milliken, 2000). It also allows individuals, freed from concerns about inclusion, to innovate, flourish, and reach their fullest potential. Furthermore, an environment of inclusion and receptiveness serves as a backdrop against which employees subsequently interact with one another across demographic lines. Because no single demographic group is valued more than another—leaving no group marginalized—employees are more freely able to engage and challenge each other yet be supportive at the same time. In other words, an AIM approach fosters positive intergroup relations that result in heightened engagement and individual and organizational performance.

An AIM workplace also promises potential benefits for recruitment and retention. The posturing of its diversity policies to appeal to the widest range of people partially determines whether an organization attracts a talented, diverse workforce in the first place. Candidates of all demographic backgrounds use the organization’s diversity policies in deciding whether or not to join its workforce (Edwards, Watkins, & Stevens, 2007; Rau & Hyland, 2003). How attractive an organization appears based on its diversity policies may be a significant factor in whether a new employee forms a strong identification with that organization (Dutton et al., 1994). An organization can increase its chances of attracting the most qualified candidates from all backgrounds by adopting diversity messages that appeal to minorities while not alienating nonminority candidates. Furthermore, because perceptions of an organization’s diversity climate affect retention (McKay et al., 2007), utilizing an AIM approach to foster a truly inclusive climate should also result in retaining employees across demographic backgrounds.

While many organizations have implemented diversity policies and initiatives, few seem to have used AIM principles. A 2007 report on white male engagement sponsored by Mattel suggests that only 41% of companies surveyed had white males represented on diversity teams and only 3% included a white male resource or affinity group (Diversity Best Practices, 2007). An example of an organization that has successfully utilized aspects of the AIM approach is IBM. D. A. Thomas's (2004) case study of IBM's diversity strategy highlights the formation of eight task forces that analyzed personnel trends and market opportunities. Notably, the task force groupings represented many social identity groups, including white males, and each task force benefited from an executive sponsor who was not necessarily a constituent of that group. Thus, IBM both included a group typically left out of diversity initiatives (i.e., nonminorities) and promoted cross-race interaction. As would be expected of an AIM approach, the initiative resulted in development of cross-cultural competence, deeper knowledge of major markets, and attraction, development, and retention of employees.

Another company that illustrates an AIM approach to diversity is PepsiCo. Similar to IBM, PepsiCo organized affinity groups sponsored by executive committee members typically from a different social identity group (e.g., a black male sponsor of a white male group and a white female sponsor of a women of color group). PepsiCo also went a step further, charging sponsors with mentoring employees in their group. PepsiCo has since been named on several "top companies" lists for minorities including those of *Fortune*, *Black Enterprise*, and *DiversityInc*. In addition to gaining reputation as an employer, according to PepsiCo, the company has also experienced substantial revenue growth, which it attributes in part to new products inspired by these and other diversity efforts (Hymowitz, 2005).

### **Implications of AIM for Research and Theory**

The practical implications of an all-inclusive workplace abound, as do future research questions regarding how AIM establishes a foundation for positive organizational change. For example, we posit that an AIM approach requires careful attention to workplace characteristics such as interdependent work and diversity cues. Furthermore, proper implementation of AIM entails recognition of important symbolic interaction and sense-making processes.

*Interdependent work and diversity cues.* Interdependent work and diversity cues are two mechanisms by which an AIM approach can positively influence organizational change. When employees must coordinate their activities because of highly interdependent work (e.g., on diversity councils and task forces, in mentoring and social networking programs, and in employees' work roles), there is greater necessity for interaction among demographically dissimilar individuals. According to Harrison and colleagues (1998), with this increased interaction, individuals' tendencies to categorize their coworkers based on demographic characteristics dissipate, and as deep-level characteristics become more apparent, the value of diversity in facilitating organizational processes such as decision making, creativity, and innovation becomes

evident (Chatman & Flynn, 2001; Earley & Mosakowski, 2000; Harrison et al., 1998; Pelled et al., 1999).

In addition, the extent to which employees subscribe to and engage in an AIM ideology depends on diversity cues that indicate the acceptance of employees' social identities (Steele, Spencer, & Aronson, 2002). For example, the distribution of diversity throughout the organization provides a signal to employees about the value of diversity. For minorities in particular, seeing that they are underrepresented in middle- and upper-management positions makes it more likely for them to discount the principles of the diversity initiative and conclude that the organization does not value people like themselves (e.g., Avery, 2003; Purdie-Vaughns et al., 2006). For nonminorities, not seeing themselves represented in diversity and inclusion structures leads to the perception that they are not valued and included. Future theorizing on diversity should therefore examine how to foster interdependent work and diversity cues that contribute positively to individual and organizational functioning.

*Symbolic interactions.* Importantly, although contextual factors (e.g., wording of diversity-related information) influence the development of an inclusive organizational environment, such objective features of the workplace are not the sole determinants of such an environment. Following a symbolic interactionist perspective of climate (Blumer, 1969; Schneider & Reichers, 1983), we posit that a *climate for diversity* emerges from a process of collective sensemaking (Weick, 1995), whereby employees together try to derive meaning about ways in which diversity is, or is not, valued in their organization. From this perspective, the value of diversity is not a "given," nor can it be mandated from upper management; rather, this value arises from interactions among the individuals within the organization (Ashforth, 1985; Schneider, & Reichers, 1983). Importantly, individuals form beliefs both about the value of diversity and about their organization's stance on diversity (Mor Barak, Cherin, & Berkman, 1998). Both play a role in individuals' active construction of diversity climate in an organization.

Future theorizing on diversity could therefore reveal how an organization's climate for diversity results from its social construction through employee interactions and communication, which in turn can be a powerful determinant of behavior over and above individual needs or motivational states (McKay et al., 2007; Schneider & Reichers, 1983). Employees do not interact with their dissimilar coworkers in a vacuum. Rather, they take part in these interactions while making sense of their organizational environment in an ongoing manner (Weick, 1995). As such, the consistency of organizational messages concerning diversity, particularly those supporting the AIM approach (e.g., through all-inclusive language), plays a large role in whether—and to what extent—employees view the organization as truly valuing its diverse workforce. In line with several properties of sensemaking (Weick, 1995), the social context is integral in setting the stage for cues, such as diversity-related practices (e.g., inclusion of all groups in diversity activities), to become salient and provide the basis for sensemaking. It is against the backdrop of all-inclusive multiculturalism that the organization can enact an environment conducive to positive organizational change. Integral to fostering positive change is the affirmation of each employee's

personal identity, comprised of his or her unique characteristics and attributes, upon which the AIM approach is built.

Further examination of the role of individual differences in the all-inclusive workplace is also needed. In an effort to understand employees' reactions to diversity initiatives, other research (e.g., Plaut et al., 2007) has examined aspects of identity, such as the need to belong (Baumeister & Leary, 1995) and organizational identification (Dutton et al., 1994). We strongly encourage the coupling of organizational features with individual differences in future attempts to uncover mechanisms underlying employee reactions to diversity initiatives.

## CONCLUSION

We have proposed that an AIM approach to diversity resolves problematic issues with traditional colorblind and multicultural approaches to diversity in organizations and increases perceptions of inclusiveness among employees. Our preliminary research findings suggest that an AIM approach does indeed decrease the association of multiculturalism with exclusion among nonminorities (Plaut et al., 2007). The AIM approach therefore promises to enhance positive relationships across difference, resulting in heightened employee engagement and individual and organizational performance. Organizations can develop an AIM workplace environment by infusing employee and prospective employee communication with all-inclusive language and by including all groups in diversity structures and policies. By fostering positive interdependent work and diversity cues and the construction of a positive climate for diversity through symbolic interaction, organizations can shape an environment conducive to positive organizational change.

In sum, taking small steps toward creating an AIM environment has the potential to enable substantial positive, organization-wide change, particularly through the development of feelings of inclusion and high-quality relationships across difference. In creating an all-inclusive, multicultural environment, organizations can create workplaces in which employees feel safe to innovate, knowing that their unique experiences and contributions are valued, and in which the generation of positive human relationships is facilitated, especially across demographic lines. Such relationships create a host of positive outcomes for individuals, organizations, and even the communities in which they are embedded (Cameron et al., 2003; Dutton & Ragins, 2006; Gittell et al., 2006), such as higher levels of physical and psychological well-being (Ryff & Singer, 2001), facility of the transfer of knowledge and coordinated action (Nahapiet & Ghoshal, 1998), and economic vitality (Cameron & Caza, 2004; Dutton, 2003).

## NOTES

1. The U.S. workforce (generally ages 25 to 64) is in the midst of a sweeping demographic transformation. From 1980 to 2020, the white working-age population is projected to decline from 82% to 63%. During the same period, the minority portion of the workforce is projected to double (from 18% to 37%),

and the Hispanic/Latino portion is projected to almost triple (from 6% to 17%). Women are projected to comprise 47% of the total labor force in 2014. They will also account for 51% of the increase in total labor force growth from 2004 to 2014 (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2007).

2. Several different terms have been used in the literature to describe the concept of diversity approaches: *perspectives* (Ely & Thomas, 2001), *ideologies* (Wolsko, Park, Judd, & Wittenbrink, 2000), *models* (Plaut, 2002), and *paradigms* (D. A. Thomas & Ely, 1996). Although we will sometimes rely on these terms somewhat interchangeably, we will favor the term *approaches* because of this article's concern with organizational approaches to managing change.

3. Our focus here is on the racial and ethnic minorities typically underrepresented in organizations, such as blacks, Latinos, and Asians, although the arguments presented here have clear implications for organizational diversity beyond racial and ethnic lines (e.g., gender, sexual orientation, etc.). We use *race* and *ethnicity* jointly to reflect the U.S. Census Bureau's designation of these demographic variables.

4. Perhaps the best-known example of organizational involvement in diversity issues are affirmative action hiring practices, where demographic categories are considered in the hiring process and allow organizations to set goals for the fair representation of women and minorities (e.g., James, Brief, Dietz, & Cohen, 2001). These practices can be informed by either multicultural or colorblind ideologies, depending on how they are enacted.

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