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What's the Business Case for Diversity in the Workplace? — Evan Apfelbaum

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What's the business case for diversity in the workplace? It's less about what diversity adds, and more about what homogeneity takes away.

Many people share a sense of moral responsibility to advocate for diversity in organizations, but what is the functional value of diversity in the workplace? Over half a century of research has provided few straightforward or consistent answers. Some studies have shown diverse teams—that is, teams comprised of people of different races, genders, and backgrounds—promote creativity, foster critical thinking, and tend to make better, more thoughtful decisions because they consider a wider range of perspectives. Other studies indicate diverse teams fuel interpersonal conflicts, reduce cohesion, and slow the pace of learning.

I think one reason it has been so hard to appreciate the *value of diversity* has to do with how we make sense of the results above. Researchers and managers alike often act as if only diverse settings are capable of changing how people behave, form impressions, and make decisions. Think about how we talk about topics related to diversity—diversity helps or hurts, weakens or strengthens, increases or decreases a given outcome. The problem with describing effects in this way is that it has created a convention in which people think about homogeneous groups as nothing more than a “control condition”—a baseline of normal functioning to which diverse groups should be compared.

Certainly, homogeneity *is* normal in terms of its incidence in society—people frequently find themselves in groups with similar others. Research has shown that people tend to be less attuned to members of social categories that are more familiar. For instance, studies have shown that individuals asked to classify others by race are slower to do so for White



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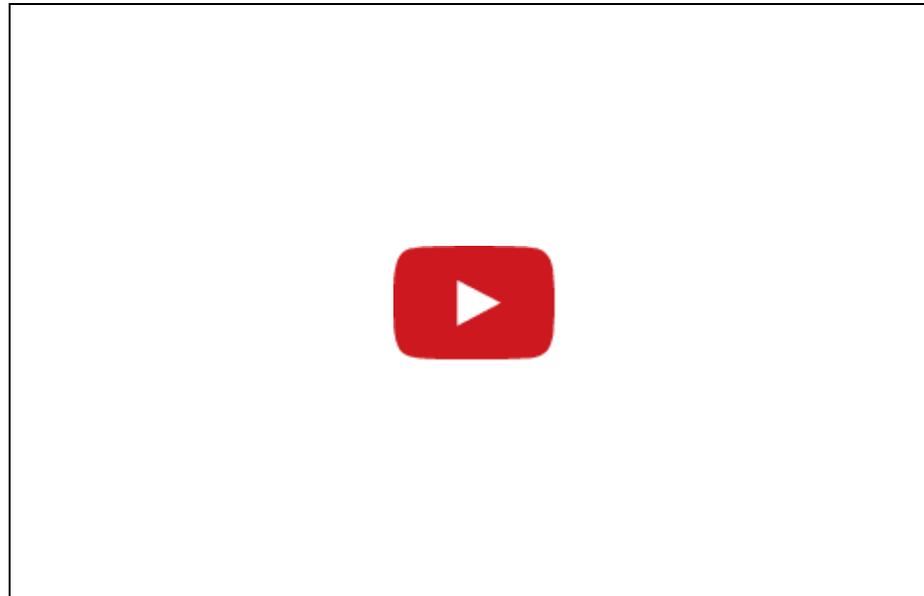
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targets—the more prototypical racial group—than they are for Black targets. Other research has shown that, when asked to consider contexts in which there are gender differences, people's explanations tend to focus on how women are different from men, not the reverse; when asked to consider differences relating to sexual orientation, people's explanations tend to focus on how gay men are different from straight men, not the reverse.



Just as we tend to fail to appreciate prototypical social information, we may be less aware of the role that homogeneity may play in shaping group behavior. That homogeneous groups are regarded as prototypical can easily be confused with the notion that the behavior we observe in these groups is rational, accurate, or optimal.

Emerging research suggests that homogeneity can lead individuals to underestimate the actual complexity of group tasks because they assume that others' behavior is more predictable than it actually is. The reason is explained by a basic principle of social psychology. People in homogeneous groups tend to believe that because others look like them, they *are* like them in terms of having similar perspectives, knowledge, and behavior. This assumption of like-mindedness feels comfortable; it caters to our basic human need for social acceptance and inclusion. But it also creates blind spots in our judgments and behavior. We underestimate the potential for seemingly similar others to have substantively different perspectives and ideas, which can lead us to make oversimplified, perhaps even objectively inaccurate assessments in these contexts.

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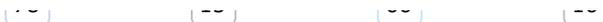
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The Business Case for Diversity in the Workplace
perhaps even, objectively inaccurate, assessments in these contexts.

The point isn't that diversity has no effects on behavior. Rather, it's that homogeneity does too. And sometimes it is the behavior in homogeneous groups—not diverse ones—that is the anomaly in need of explanation.

When the issues of diversity come up, perhaps one additional question managers and researchers should be asking is: what is the functional value of *homogeneity*?

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