Organizational efforts to support diversity

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In 2008, the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC, 2009) received over 95,000 discrimination claims, most of which were related to race and sex discrimination. Although approximately two thirds of these claims may be dismissed (Goldman, Gutek, Stein, & Lewis, 2006), the number of claims filed indicates that discrimination is not a thing of the past. Whether it is warranted or unwarranted, perceptions of discrimination exist in today's workplace. Importantly, these perceptions harm not only the individual employee (i.e., the victim of the discrimination) but also the organizations in which these employees work as well as the societies in which these organizations operate. Perceptions of discrimination harm individual employees in multiple ways: psychologically, physiologically, and socially (Clark, Anderson, Clark, & Williams, 1999; Dipboye & Colella, 2005). Perceptions of discrimination harm the organizations in which these employees work in terms of job dissatisfaction and higher turnover (Dipboye & Colella, 2005). Perceptions of discrimination harm societies overall because these perceptions affect individuals and institutions beyond the organization in which a discriminatory event occurs. For example, think about the hundreds of millions of dollars spent on costly lawsuits such as the racial discrimination suit against Coca-Cola settled for $192.5 million or the one against Texaco settled for $176.1 million (King & Spruell, 2001) and the tarnished public images of these companies as a result of these events (Pruitt & Nethercutt, 2002; Wentling & Palma-Rivas, 1997). Clearly, perceptions of discrimination lead to unwanted consequences for any and all parties involved and should be managed to prevent further harm to employees, employers, and societies at large.

The focus of this short note is to examine the latest research focused on mitigating the harmful effects of perceived discrimination in the workplace. What can organizations do to

mitigate the harmful effects of perceived discrimination?   It is this challenging question that we sought to investigate in our recent article published in the *Journal of Organizational Behavior* (Triana & Garcia, 2009). In that article, we examined the nature of the relationship between employees' perceived racial discrimination, defined as being treated differently than others on the basis of one's group membership (Allport, 1954), and procedural justice, which refers to the fairness of the procedures used in the organization to arrive at one's work outcomes (Thibaut & Walker, 1975). We also studied how that relationship was affected by organizational efforts to support diversity, defined as employees' perceptions that the practices of the organization indicate that valuing and promoting diversity is a priority in the organization.

To test the effect of organizational efforts to support diversity on the relationship between perceived discrimination and procedural justice we drew a sample from a predominantly Hispanic community in a city along the United States/Mexican border. We found a negative relationship between perceived racial discrimination and procedural justice, as prior research has shown for other forms of discrimination (Bibby, 2008 for age discrimination; Blau, Tatum, Ward-Cook, Dobria, & McCoy, 2005 and Foley, Hang-Yue, & Wong, 2005 for gender discrimination). Most importantly, and consistent with the group-value model of procedural justice (Tyler & Lind, 1992) which states that people look at the procedures that those in authority put in place as a way of assessing their standing and worth within the group, we also found that perceived organizational efforts to support diversity mitigate the harmful effects of perceived racial discrimination on procedural justice. Furthermore, this effect had an indirect impact on both affective commitment, which refers to one's emotional attachment to the employer (Allen & Mayer, 1990), and organizational citizenship behavior, defined as

discretionary actions an employee willingly engages in outside of their normal duties to help the organization (Organ, 1988).

Taking into consideration that our sample had low levels of reported perceived racial discrimination (probably due to the fact that our participants were mainly Hispanics in a majority Hispanic community), our findings have strong implications for management. What our findings suggest is that if the organization appears to be implementing practices which indicate that the organization values and supports diversity, employees who have experienced discriminatory acts from certain individuals at work can feel as if their treatment has been more procedurally fair than other employees who experience racial discrimination but do not perceive that their organizations value and support diversity. This has important practical implications for organizations, because it suggests that if employees perceive that they are the targets of racial discrimination from certain individuals they interact with at work, those negative feelings that result from perceived discrimination need not necessarily spread to the employees' views about the entire organization so long as the employees believe that the organization's top decision-makers and policies are supportive of diversity.

In addition to the finding that organizational efforts to support diversity are important, we would also add that the ideal situation is for the organization to implement diversity management practices together with a zero tolerance policy for discriminatory acts of any kind. The best policy against discrimination in the workplace is to stop it from happening in the first place (Dipboye & Colella, 2005). Therefore, it is critical for organizations to have a zero tolerance policy against all forms of discrimination and to make this policy known to employees through training and other reminders such as posters or articles on company intranets. However, because organizations cannot control all the individual-to-individual actions in the workplace which may

be perceived as being discriminatory, it is also important to demonstrate organizational efforts to support diversity by sincerely embracing diversity management.

Next, we provide some practical examples of common ways in which organizations can demonstrate organizational efforts to support diversity through their actions. According to a recent diversity benchmarking report by Catalyst (2006), the most frequently used diversity management practices target diversity on the basis of sex, race, sexual orientation, working parent status, disability status, part-time working status, and age/generational issues, as well as issues pertaining to nationality and religion. Diversity management practices utilized to target these particular groups of people include events like engaging in diversity recruiting, observing religious/cultural holidays, implementing employee engagement surveys, organizing community outreach, and cultural events, in addition to conducting bias avoidance and stereotype training (Catalyst, 2006). However, it is also important to note that some diversity management practices have produced mixed results (Kalev, Dobbin, & Kelly, 2006; Kravitz, 2007). The somewhat limited research on the efficacy of diversity management practices indicates that the most effective programs are those that are supported by top management and those for which people are held accountable for the results (Kalev et al., 2006; Kravitz, 2007). Programs such as diversity councils, affirmative action programs, targeted recruiting, work-life balance programs, and the inclusion of minorities in top management have been shown to be effective, particularly when top management has assigned responsibility for the success of these programs (Kalev et al., 2006; Kravitz, 2007). Together with a zero tolerance policy towards discrimination at work, these are some practices that companies on the leading edge of diversity management have implemented to mitigate the damaging effects of perceived discrimination at work.

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