
VALUES ABOUT FAIRNESS IN THE ETHNICALLY DIVERSE WORKPLACE

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ABSTRACT

American organizations and society seem to be caught in a bind between two views regarding what is fair in the ethnically diverse workplace. From the individualistic perspective, it is patently unfair to pay attention to group memberships, while from the group perspective it is unfair when we do not attend to group memberships. To reconcile these views requires reframing; we must accept both the reality of group differences and the natural variations among individuals within groups. © 1997 John Wiley & Sons, Inc.

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In working to help organizations in the United States become less oppressive and more fully inclusive of people of all ethnic groups, I often see a stumbling block that arises for many organizations and their members as well as society at large as they come to grips with ethnic diversity. Even people who genuinely feel committed to justice and equality sometimes feel stuck when considering such questions as whether it is more fair to focus on the similarities among people from diverse groups or on their differences, or whether people from disparate ethnic groups should be treated all the same or all differently. The trap as I see it has to do with our values about how fairness relates to groups and to group membership and with the lenses through which these values are framed and communicated.

WHAT'S UNFAIR?

Essentially, I see the issue as a false debate over what constitutes fairness in dealing with ethnic diversity. When we look at it this way, we can start to see why American organizations and society often seem to be caught in a bind. Many people sometimes react negatively when they are asked to think about themselves and others in terms of their ethnic group memberships.¹⁻⁴ Although expressed in a variety of ways, a common reaction heard in organizations learning to live with diversity goes something like this: "I prefer not to look at or think about people in terms of their ethnicity. Why should we pay so much attention to people's group memberships? Isn't that unfair? Isn't the ultimate goal to create organizations and a society where the outcomes for individuals are not based on their ethnicity?"⁵⁻⁷

I believe that such judgments are based on assessing fairness from what I call the *individualistic perspective*. Although for many, this approach to fairness expresses an ideal of justice based on the notion that group memberships should not determine what happens to individuals,⁸⁻¹⁰ others see it used as a way to obscure the disparate treatment and differential power that have characterized the history of race and ethnic relations in the United States.^{7,11-18} An alternative view for assessing fairness, what I call the *group perspective*, developed as a way of opposing the oppression seen to be linked to the individualistic view. Through the lens of the group perspective, to assess the presence and the extent of racial and ethnic discrimination and to ensure group-level equity, we must take people's group memberships into account. Although from the individualistic perspective it is unfair to pay much

attention to people's identity group memberships, from the group perspective it is ignoring people's race or ethnicity that can be seen as patently unfair.

The group view is sometimes also seen as unfair even by beneficiaries of the changes it can bring,¹⁹⁻²¹ in large part because people are uncomfortable with all group members being seen as alike. They too, however, see the individualistic view as the only alternative. In many circumstances, consideration of, and emphasis on, racial and ethnic group membership can be experienced as discriminatory because, from the individualistic lens, this means that other aspects of the person are ignored;¹ it can even be seen as calling into question, for example, the qualifications of individuals whose group memberships are highlighted. Despite these negative perceptions, acting as if ethnic group membership makes no difference in society or at work ignores both the very real power differentials that continue to exist and the other important ways, such as culture, in which ethnic groups differ from one another.²²⁻²⁸

The problem, and the key to a resolution of the dilemma, is that these views are paradoxical in that they emanate from the very nature of group life. To reconcile them requires reframing; we must accept both the reality of group differences and the natural variations among individuals within groups. Before pointing to possible paths toward resolution, I will illustrate the dilemma with some examples.

EXPERIENCING THE PARADOX: ILLUSTRATIONS FROM ORGANIZATIONAL LIFE

Movement back and forth between the individualistic and the group perspectives to evaluate fairness can seem to result in irresolvable contradictions. Some examples from organizational life illustrate how even the same person or the same organization can experience the dilemma created by the juxtaposition of both sets of values.

My first case is a Puerto Rican manager whom I will call Ed. I interviewed Ed in the course of a study I conducted in 1986^{2,29} at a midsized corporation in New England — the XYZ corporation (not its real name). Of about 3,000 managerial level employees at XYZ, 46 identified themselves as Hispanic. Ed had been working at XYZ for about 7 years after graduating from college, and he had successfully moved up a few notches in the corporate ladder during that time. Although Ed had had varying experiences with different supervisors, he generally

had a positive opinion of his capabilities. He considered himself a good worker, with high ambitions. The company recognized his ability and ambition in various ways. Indeed, Ed participated in the company's "Hi-Po" program, designed to recognize managers with high potential and push them along suitable career paths within the company.

The company liked to reward good workers by featuring their pictures in its annual report, so Ed felt very flattered and proud when he was asked to pose for one of these photographs. His assumption was that in this way he was being recognized as an excellent manager. At some point later, after being photographed, it struck Ed during a conversation with a fellow manager that the reason he had been asked to be in the brochure was because the company wanted to make sure there was a Hispanic included in the picture. As Ed now interpreted what happened, XYZ top management was solely interested in portraying a multiethnic workforce, so Ed became the "Hispanic representative." Once he framed it this way in his mind, Ed felt very let down. He no longer felt that his inclusion in the photograph had been based on his ability as a manager. What happened, it seems, is that Ed believed that because the person setting up the photograph chose Ed because of his ethnicity, he was then being given less credit for his individual merit and competence.

One might take this to suggest that Ed thought that his ethnicity should not be at all relevant to the workplace and that somehow XYZ should find a way to ignore completely this aspect of people in making personnel decisions, but this was not the case. At the time I interviewed him, Ed was one of the principal leaders in a group of Hispanic managers in the company — the Hispanic Managers Association (a pseudonym). He was actively working within the company to improve the position of Hispanics, and to identify and organize the few that were there. Indeed, Ed was one of the most vocal advocates for a new training program on managing diversity that would sensitize XYZ managers to the special issues facing Latinos and Latinas, and to the issue of cultural differences in general.

Herein are the elements of the paradox. On the one hand, Ed felt denied when his ethnicity was taken into account. Assuming that his group membership did play a role in his selection for the annual report, he interpreted this as ignoring his achievements and depriving him of his right to fair consideration. On the other hand, he was very involved in letting the company know that it was not taking Hispanics seriously, and he was consistently demanding that at least one — if not more —

Hispanics be promoted to higher-level positions, in which there were none at the time, and that more effort be made to hire additional Hispanic managers at all levels. Ed thought that as long as the company did not somehow pay more attention to ethnicity, Hispanic managers would be denied the opportunities for promotions that they deserved.

Thus, Ed himself experienced the dilemma that results from juxtaposing the individualistic and group perspectives. From a group perspective, Ed strongly believed that his company was insensitive to the needs and concerns of Hispanics. They must be recognized and helped in their advancement, he would say, yet when he experienced a situation in which he believed that this happened, he felt cheated. From an individualistic perspective, Ed believed that each person should be judged exactly for what he or she is. What he meant by this is that he would like equal treatment and elimination of ethnic bias; he wants exactly the same principles applied to himself as they might be to others, yet he said to me when we spoke, "I don't think about the same things as other people here — I'm different from them."

Daniel, another Puerto Rican manager, in sales, provides a second illustration of the paradox. Daniel told me, referring to the same Hi-Po program: "I was frankly shocked when I got selected for the . . . program. I think if I hadn't been Hispanic I wouldn't be in the program." He said this after describing how XYZ is a very political company, in which where you go depends on who you know, how you dress, and so on, and suggesting that he did not feel that he quite fit in, but then Daniel told me that in his interview he was told the "opposite" — that on his feedback sheet, it said that "whether this particular individual was Hispanic or not, he would still be recommended for the program because of his achievements." Somebody, it seems, had felt the need to make sure to let him know that they had not noticed that Daniel is Puerto Rican. Daniel, however, saw his selection as possible only because his ethnicity *was* noticed.

Jim, an Anglo manager involved in providing support to the Hispanic Managers Association, also helped to illustrate the paradox. He seemed genuinely interested in promoting diversity at XYZ and in helping the Hispanic managers accomplish their goals. Jim let me know about his personal and professional commitment to these issues, and about his years of hosting international exchange students in his home. Jim was a man who was interested in thinking about other people in terms of their backgrounds, and who certainly had experience doing so. Yet, when I needed to get a list of Hispanic managers in the company so

that I might write to them to invite them to an interview, he was particularly concerned that I not offend anyone. He explained how, in the past, one manager had been very upset about receiving an unsolicited letter from the Hispanic Managers Association because she did not believe that the company had the right to give out information about her ethnicity. Jim was so concerned about this one isolated incident that I interpreted his bringing it up as a way of expressing his own discomfort with putting people into ethnic categories and talking about them in ethnic terms.

Ed, Daniel, and Jim provide individual-level examples of the seeming contradictions that arise when either the individualistic or the group lens serve as the only alternative for assessing fairness. I found similar illustrations of the paradox at the organizational level. One department at XYZ responsible for organizational development and training actively organized Blacks and Latinos; other units — for example, those evaluating employees — sought to avoid any semblance of noticing such affiliations. One often heard stories about the “problem” of finding qualified persons of color to fill job openings: “We would love to hire one,” I was told, “but we just can’t find them!” Then, when persons of color were brought in, presumably because they successfully met all the criteria, they were not moved up the promotion ladder. In evaluations of employees, managers seemed to bend over backwards to make sure they were unbiased: “His group had nothing to do with it!” we heard, yet group differences persisted, so someone must have been noticing group membership, in one way or another.

XYZ listed Diversity, with a capital D, as one of its core values. The term appeared on posters everywhere. The organization development office held state-of-the-art workshops on race relations and sponsored ethnically identified organizations, such as the Hispanic Managers Association and the Black Managers Caucus. In planning programs, it tried to make sure that members of different ethnic groups were involved. Yet the same organization development group sponsored training programs such as Time Management, which told the managers the one or two most efficient ways to handle their time, with no attempt to address the possibility of cultural differences in this area. The company, as concerned with diversity as it was, expended a vast amount of effort preparing very detailed manuals that instructed its customer service representatives exactly what to say to customers, word for word, with little or no room for any deviation.

The common thread that ties these anecdotes together is the underlying concern with assessing fairness. To what extent is it viewed as fair to consider people's ethnicity when making organizational decisions and formulating policies? Ed, Daniel, and the other Latino and Latina managers I talked to at XYZ seemed to go back and forth. In part, their insecurity in both positive and negative instances as to whether their experiences were due to their particular individual features or to their group membership could be traced to the way others constructed them only in ethnic terms, and then framed that as mutually exclusive with their other characteristics. Ed expressed it this way:

Even though you consider yourself one of the guys, American, and a professional, a manager, you have a lot of different statuses outside your Hispanicity; people have subtle ways of letting you know that when they look at you, they see a Señor first or a Hispanic first. Maybe not first, but at least, . . . one of the first things, they look at you, and they say, "Well he's a manager, but he's also a Hispanic." . . . I've been called Jose, and I've been called San Juan.

To the extent that Ed's identity as a Hispanic was highlighted, exaggerated, and caricatured by others and became the primary attribute they saw in him, he experienced it as delegitimizing his role as a manager. Thus, I believe that much of the difficulty experienced by the Latino and Latina managers in reconciling their need for individualized treatment with the importance they gave to their ethnicity was related to their encounter with a general view that sees ethnic identification as incompatible with individuality.

As Lucy, another fairly successful Puerto Rican manager, put it:

I would not want to be put in a position that I could not handle, simply because I'm a Hispanic and I have to fill a quota. I'd resent that, 'cause you're not being fair to me. However, don't take anything away from me because I'm Hispanic. . . . And I think a good manager should just look at people as individuals.

Lucy seems to be accepting the idea that being an individual does not include being Hispanic. This is a view with which most of the Hispanic managers at XYZ had to cope in one way or another. The differences among them were in how they handled the tension that it engendered. This tension came from an all-too-widely accepted assump-

tion that focusing on the group implies ignoring the individual, and that looking at individuals means being blind to group memberships.

EQUITY FOR INDIVIDUALS AND GROUPS

The dilemma is not restricted to Latinos and Latinas as XYZ as they struggle to improve their position. This tension crops up again and again as citizens, employers, educational institutions, legislators, and the courts consider alternative policies for social justice. Furthermore, we can find ourselves, if we indeed value inclusion and equity, understanding and sympathizing with both sides of the argument. Of course we should not judge an individual simply by the groups he or she belongs to. No one wants to feel that she was placed in a job to fill a quota, if this is taken to mean that her contributions were not valued. But if we ignore people's group memberships, aren't we also devaluing something important about them? And aren't we then implicitly recreating society along the lines defined by the historically dominant group? Wouldn't we be asking people of color to be just like Whites in all but external appearance to be "qualified" and included? This, too, is undesirable and unfair.

The problem is based on the false and paradoxical dichotomy between the individualistic and the group perspectives (summarized in Table I). However, these are views entrenched in American values about fairness.^{9, 30-32} In the individualistic view, we emphasize the commonalities among us and thus the importance of treating everyone alike, and we believe that it is only when we let group labels get in the way that we discriminate. In picking among candidates for a job, for example, the procedure and the outcome should be viewed as fair if any qualified person is ensured of having the same opportunity to receive the job as another equally qualified person. To be able to make such a choice equitably, that is, to determine who is the most qualified, we should be able to compare inputs across individuals.¹² Thus, a fair selection will be one that measures everyone according to the same rules, preferably defined in advance. If the same criteria of competence are used to measure every individual, regardless of ethnicity, then from the individualistic perspective, the procedure and the outcome are fair. Indeed, it is such an ideal — to abolish the exclusion of persons of color from employment or other opportunities because of their race or ethnicity —

TABLE I
Paradoxical Perspectives for Assessing Fairness

| | <i>Individualistic</i> | <i>Group</i> |
|--------------------------|---|---|
| View of the person | "Self-contained" ⁴ Person is distinct from ascribed characteristics (e.g., ethnicity) | "Ensembled" ⁴ Person is shaped by group memberships (e.g., ethnicity) |
| Level of analysis | Individual: how much opportunity is available to the person? Concerned with microjustice: ^{64,65} are individual outcomes justly distributed? | Group: How much opportunity is available to the group? Concerned with macrojustice. ^{64,65} Are group outcomes justly distributed? |
| Equal opportunity | Assessed case-by-case: e.g., does a specific person have the same opportunity to receive the job as any other equally qualified specific person? | Assessed in the aggregate (over time, situations, and individuals): e.g., does a specific group (and its members) have the same opportunity to receive the job as any other group? |
| Equity exists when | Individuals with similar inputs obtain similar outcomes Everyone's inputs are measured using the same criteria Extraneous factors are ignored | There is group-level equality (thus making individual inputs commensurate) Group-level differences in culture and history are considered in evaluating individual inputs Alternative cultural definitions of competence are equally weighted |
| Fair assessment | Is objective Is color- and culture-blind Uses pre-defined and consistent criteria for every individual | Is relativistic Is culture-sensitive and group-conscious Uses criteria appropriate to the person's group (considers individuals in the context of their group experience) |
| Discrimination exists if | Considerations of ethnicity (or anything other than "merit") determine or influence individual outcomes | Ethnic status and power distributions and cultural differences are ignored in determining individual (and group) outcomes and in defining "merit" |
| Associated values | Meritocratic Competence is absolute and self-evident People from different groups are basically the same Ignoring group membership will permit individual merit to emerge more clearly Groups stifle individual diversity and choice Individuals should have freedom of choice and equality of opportunity Group differences are destructive and divisive | Pluralistic Competence is culturally defined and relative People from different groups are basically different Ignoring group membership will obscure individual merit Groups are a primary source of individual diversity and choice Groups should have freedom of choice and equality of opportunity Group differences are natural and valuable |
| Interventions | Focus on similarities Seek to deemphasize categories and categorical thinking | Focus on differences Seek to emphasize cultural awareness and sensitivity |

that has been at the core of much of the struggle for civil rights in the United States.

The individualistic view fits well with the meritocratic values that have dominated American society.^{9,12} From this perspective, the person is seen as distinct and apart from such ascribed characteristics as race, gender, or even who one's father is.^{3,4,10} These factors are considered extraneous, and as tending to obscure judgments of the individual as such. Therefore, from an individualistic perspective, it is unfair to consider them. Individual factors such as skills or achievements, on the other hand, are considered legitimate, because they provide an individually based form of comparison that is presumably shared and objective and so allows us to judge individual competence.

This individualistic view is consistent with approaches to reducing prejudice that encourage members of different groups to focus on their similarities.³³ The goal is to eliminate categorical thinking,³⁴⁻³⁷ which is thought to lead to invidious biases that prevent people from objectively judging the competence of members of other groups.³⁸ An individualistic perspective would have us believe that by ignoring group memberships, it is more likely that individual merit will be recognized, and that members of different groups will get along better. Therefore, this view would encourage group-blind policies, which see racial and ethnic group membership as irrelevant to how any individual is treated. Once we ignore group memberships, we will presumably be more likely to see and to appreciate the full range of individual diversity.

In the group view, in contrast, we emphasize the differences among ethnic groups, for example, in history and culture, and thus the importance of being sensitive to these in dealing with others.^{1,6,17,23,25,39-43} In this view, it is expecting the same behavior and values from everyone regardless of group membership that is discriminatory. To assess fairness, the group perspective considers the degree of opportunity that is available to the group-as-a-whole. It is not enough in this view that any given individuals have equal opportunity; groups must have equal opportunity as well. Moreover, to assess this, we must look at the aggregate: To see if discrimination exists, we must consider the experience of members of the groups in question over time and situations. To assess equity adequately from a group perspective, we must be able to compare inputs across groups, rather than simply across individuals.^{44,45} This also has been an integral aspect of the struggle for civil rights and against oppression: Justice will be attained only when the whole group is treated as an equal partner in society, not only when selected individuals are

seated at the table; to know if we have succeeded we must keep the groups in focus.

Ethnic groups differ from each other in at least two relevant ways that affect the evaluation and comparison of individual inputs. Attention to either or both of these differences suggests that ignoring group membership in comparing individuals is unfair. To create comparability at the group level, we need to take into account the ways in which groups differ. First, there is a long history of discrimination against certain groups.^{18,46} This means that some groups are starting out with less power, as shown by underrepresentation, lack of voice in defining evaluation criteria, and restricted access to the resources necessary to compete along individualistic lines. To be fair to the group in question, we must make adjustments in the distributions of resources and power, and procedures must take this into account by considering group membership in making decisions about individuals. Using the same metric for individuals from two groups with different histories means that they are not receiving equal opportunity.

Second, and more important to my argument, ethnic groups differ in their cultural features. Groups differ in how they define individual competence and achievement, so that the same behaviors will mean different things for members of different cultures.^{25,41,47-50} Fairness from a group perspective means that individuals must be understood in their cultural context.²⁴ Equity at the group level can only exist when alternative cultural definitions of competence are given equal weight.

The way past discrimination as well as cultural difference can be taken into account is by considering people's group memberships in dealing with them. Indeed, from the group perspective, it would be unfair to ignore this aspect of individuals.⁴⁵ To be able to compare across groups, we must measure individual members using different rules that are appropriate to the group in question. Obviously, to do this, we need to be conscious of group membership.^{24,25} We can still ask whether an individual is competent or qualified, but to be fair about it, we must do it in a culturally sensitive fashion that looks at the person in the context of the group experience.

This view is consistent with approaches to ethnic diversity that emphasize differences and cultural awareness.^{25,51-54} To improve my relations with others, I need to think about where they — and I — are coming from, including ethnic background. In a group-based view, "colorblind"⁵⁵ and culture-blind policies are seen to perpetuate inequities, because they will tend to foster the adoption of the cultural values of

the majority, without even acknowledging their source.^{12,56} Thus, a group perspective would encourage heightening awareness of ethnicity in interactions. It suggests that fairness means clearly taking group membership into account in developing organizational approaches to ethnic diversity.

TOWARD FINDING OUR WAY OUT OF THE PARADOX

Although the group perspective provides an important frame from which to combat group-level discrimination and inequality, it can sometimes be experienced as requiring undue generalizations about individuals. An exaggerated or exclusive group focus can obscure the multifaceted and complex nature of diversity and individual uniqueness that includes great variation within groups.¹ The problem is assuming that the only alternative is ignoring the group; the individualistic perspective does not provide the answer, yet as people like Ed become uncomfortable with aspects of one perspective, they seem to feel that the only alternative is the other set of values. It is the false dichotomy that constitutes the trap. To view the individualistic and group perspectives as mutually exclusive sets up this dilemma regarding fairness.

So how can these seemingly contradictory values be reconciled? The solution to the paradox does not lie in convincing the advocates of whatever perspective we more strongly disagree with that they are wrong. It is more likely to lie in giving up the type of thinking that says that one side must "win." Fairness means coming to terms with the full complexity of diversity, including both the individual and the group levels. Both the group and the individualistic perspectives are integral to American thinking and practice regarding fairness and civil rights, and to the human experience, and in their various versions both views find proponents among all parties to the issue. While they struggle to protect group interests and identity, members of oppressed groups also value their individuality, and members of the dominant White majority, while suggesting that it is only the individual that should count, continue to act in concert to defend collective positions. When looked at this way, we can see that the individual must be valued, *and* group rights must be protected. Both perspectives must be concurrently maintained.

Both the individualistic and the group perspectives have some appeal to people, depending on the circumstances, yet each has some shortcomings. The individualistic view obviously does not adequately consider cultural differences and differences in group experience and

power.¹² Competence must be defined from *some* cultural perspective. In a meritocratic system that seeks to ignore ethnicity, the issue becomes which group's definition will predominate. Thus, the individualistic perspective can be a vehicle for obscuring the intergroup power dynamics that operate in a diverse society. Researchers have shown how even in a system that is supposedly "colorblind" and culture-blind, people do not actually behave that way.^{12,56-59} Beyond this, people care deeply about and want to maintain their ethnic group identities,^{2,25,60-63} so it can be at least as prejudiced to ignore these as it is to pay them undue attention. In other words, part of what makes individuals who they are is their experience as members of particular ethnic groups and their internalization of their group's culture.¹ To forget or to ignore this is to deny something about the person. This suggests that an individualistic view can be reframed so that ethnicity is seen as legitimately comprising something important and valuable about the person.

This points to the problems with the group perspective. All members of an ethnic group are not alike. Moreover, each of us belongs to many groups and so our individuality is comprised of the unique intersection of these various identities together with our personal experiences and personality.¹ How can we know when to apply our aggregate knowledge about cultural differences in particular cases? In practice, people are uncomfortable with being lumped together and categorized, if they experience this as denying them their individuality, so to apply alternative standards to individuals simply on the basis of group membership alone is not enough. We need to know the degree to which the alternative standard fits this individual. This suggests the need to reframe the group perspective to take into account within-group variations, so as to allow a flexible application of group-conscious policies.

We must be more conscious of this tension inherent in the nature of an ethnically diverse society, and learn to better live with it. We could do so by acknowledging that ethnicity and culture are not extraneous to what makes individuals unique — rather they are important parts of the person, *all* persons. One of the rights of the individual is that of being part of a group. We also must realize that individual variation is an important aspect of groups, and that generalization about collective identity or character are not in and of themselves discriminatory — they are so only when they are indiscriminately and ignorantly applied to individuals.

We need to find new ways of thinking about and evaluating competence and related constructs so as to be at once culturally sensitive and

considerate of individual differences. The first step is to move toward conceptions of the individual that accept the legitimacy of collective life. By looking at the intersections of groups and individuals, we can develop notions of cultural diversity that consider individual variation as being based in part along meaningful group lines. When we can see ethnicity as giving meaning to the person, rather than denying or contradicting individuality, and at once recognize that each person shapes her and his unique representation and experience of that ethnicity, we will be well along the way to finding fairness in the ethnically diverse workplace.

NOTES

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