REATIONS TO DEMOGRAPHIC DIVERSITY:
SIMILARITY-ATTRACTION OR SELF-REGULATION

Anne S. Tsui, Graduate School of Management, University of California, Irvine, California 92717
Susan J. Ashford, Dartmouth College

ABSTRACT

This study tested two competing perspectives on the effects of demographic diversity on managerial response. The similarity-attraction paradigm suggests that demographic differences should reduce feedback seeking while the adaptive self-regulation perspective suggests the opposite. The results provided some support for each perspective and suggested additional relevant motivations for seeking.

INTRODUCTION

It is now common knowledge that the American work force is becoming increasingly diverse in terms of such demographic characteristics as race, ethnicity, gender, and age (Johnston & Packer, 1987). Fundamentally, increasing diversity means that managers at every level will be working with increasing number of constituents—peers, superiors, and subordinates—who are dissimilar from them on one or more of the aforementioned demographic attributes. The current study explored the effect of such diversity on one discretionary managerial action—their tendency to seek feedback voluntarily from peers who are demographically different. Recent research (Ashford & Tsui, 1991) has linked managers’ tendency to seek feedback to managerial effectiveness.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND AND HYPOTHESES

Two perspectives offer insights into the effects of demographic diversity on managerial behavior. These perspectives suggest competing hypotheses regarding the likelihood that managers will seek feedback from constituents who are demographically different from them. The first is the similarity-attraction perspective on which much of the recent organizational demography literature is based. The second perspective is that of adaptive self-regulation.

Similarity-Attraction

The original research on the similarity-attraction paradigm provided substantial evidence that attraction was high among individuals who shared similarity in attitudes (Bryne, 1971), socioeconomic background (Byrne, Clore, & Worchel, 1966), competency (Baskett, 1973), or social activities (Werner & Parmelee, 1979). Recent research has shown that dissimilarity can even lead to repulsion (Rosenbaum, 1986). In general, the similarity-attraction hypothesis states that people are drawn to those who are similar to themselves.

Similarity has been related to many outcomes beyond attraction. Of particular interest here is the finding that similarity has a positive effect on communication and social integration. For example, Lincoln and Miller (1979) found increased demographic similarity in gender, race, and education to positively affect the frequency of communication and the development of friendship ties. Similarly, Zenger and Lawrence (1989) related age and tenure similarity to the frequency of technical communication in project teams. O’Reilly et. al (1989) found similarity in tenure within work groups increased social integration. Tsui and O’Reilly (1989) found that demographic differences in age, education, race, and sex between a superior and subordinate were associated with the subordinates being seen as less attractive.

These similarity-attraction findings have direct implications for managers working with diverse constituents. They imply that managers would be less likely to engage in communication with constituents who are different. They would be less prone to initiate interactions beyond minimum requirements. Of the three common constituents—superiors, subordinates, and peers, managers have the most discretion in terms of their interaction with peers (Sayles, 1979). Therefore, the effect of similarity-attraction would probably operate most strongly on voluntary interaction among peers. Given the freedom of discretion, the similarity-attraction perspective suggests that managers will likely reduce their voluntary interaction with peers who are different from them on such demographic attributes as gender, race, age, or education.

Adaptive Self-Regulation

The adaptive self-regulation perspective, on the other hand, suggests a different reaction to demographic diversity. This perspective, based on control theory (Carver & Scheier, 1981) and self-management (cf. Manz & Sims, 1980), holds that managers regulate their behavior to be effective. Self-regulation involves setting goals, seeking feedback, and taking corrective actions based on the information obtained. Self-regulation by managers is especially important due to the inherently complex and ambiguous nature of managerial work (Lombardo & McCall, 1982). The nature of managerial work suggests that managers have a large degree of discretion in their daily conduct and activities. Peer interaction is an important part of manager’s daily activities and that self-regulation with peers may be most susceptible to discretion by managers.
The adaptive self-regulation perspective argues that some individuals take a more proactive orientation than others in managing their day-to-day activities (Ashford & Tsui, 1991). Active self-regulators know that others in their work environment often have different expectations for them and hold different opinions of their effectiveness. These opinions are important sources of information for self-correction. The adaptive self-regulating managers also are sensitive to factors that may increase the complexity of expectations that others have for them as well as the divergence of opinions that others hold of their behavior. One such factor may be the extent of diversity in the demographic characteristics of their constituents.

Given this sensitivity, self-regulating managers should be motivated to try to understand the nature of these demographic differences and associated dynamics. In an effort to counterbalance the tendency toward the reduced interaction among people who are dissimilar, they may increase their voluntary communication with those peers who are demographically different. Not all forms of communication are useful. Recently, feedback seeking on performance has been proposed to be especially valuable for managerial self-regulation (Ashford & Tsui, 1991) because managers seldom are given feedback spontaneously by others, especially negative information which is essential for performance correction (Felson, 1980; Tesser & Rosen, 1975). To obtain the necessary information for self-regulation, managers need to seek out these types of information proactively and actively.

Active feedback seeking comprises of at least two dimensions, the type of feedback (positive versus negative) sought and the method of seeking (direct versus indirect). Managers interested in information instrumental for maintaining their effectiveness should prefer negative feedback over positive feedback for two reasons. (1) negative feedback is higher in diagnosticity and (2) it has a lower impression management cost than positive feedback (i.e., it looks "worse" to seek positive feedback). These dynamics suggest that self-regulating managers should seek more negative feedback and less positive feedback from others. The similarity-attraction dynamic, on the other hand, suggests that managers would reduce the seeking of both types of feedback from others who are demographically different.

The effects of demographic diversity on the methods of seeking are less clear. Seeking methods differ in the amount of inference required to obtain feedback (indirect method requiring more inference than direct method) and in the potential impression management costs of exposing a desire for feedback (direct method more costly than indirect method). Impression management concerns might lead most managers to a greater use of indirect methods of feedback seeking. Self-regulating managers, on the other hand, may be more likely to use the direct methods in part due to their awareness of the greater likelihood of inference errors associated with the indirect methods of seeking (Ashford & Cummings, 1983). Clearly, feedback seeking is a complex set of activities and thus its relationship to demographic diversity may also be far from linear and simple. For this exploratory study, both the types of feedback and the methods of seeking were included to detect the potential complex patterns of their relationship to diversity.

Hypotheses

The following hypotheses were derived based on these two perspectives:

Hypothesis 1: Based on the dynamic of similarity-attraction, there will be a negative relationship between demographic diversity and active feedback seeking.

Hypothesis 2: Based on the self-regulation perspective, there will be a positive relationship between demographic diversity and active feedback seeking.

Relevant Demographic Variables for Active Feedback Seeking

The concept of demography is not unidimensional. Individuals are better described by a demographic profile than by a single demographic attribute. The current study included five demographic variables: age, educational level, gender, race, and company tenure. A similar logic is expected to operate on all of these demographic attributes. Difference on any of these attributes serves as a cue to signal the need for more or less interaction.

Demographic diversity includes the direct demographic traits of the feedback seeker and the feedback source, as well as the differences in the demographic attributes between two individuals—in this case, the managers and their peers. For example, the self-regulation perspective suggests that managers in the minority status may be more sensitive to the need for feedback than managers in the majority status. Therefore, managers of a minority race and female managers may seek more feedback from their peers than white or male managers. The self-regulating managers may also seek more feedback from others in the minority status, i.e., female peers or peers who are younger, with less education, and of a minority race. In total, we expect feedback-seeking behavior to be affected by all three sets of demographic variables. Based on the similarity-attraction paradigm, we expect the managers to be sensitive primarily to the differences between a dyad. Based on the self-regulation perspective, we expect the managers to be sensitive to direct traits as well as to differences in traits. Tsui and O'Reilly (1989) used the term "simple demography" to refer to the direct demographic attributes and the term "relational demography" to refer to the differences in attributes between two individuals.

Historically, demographic variables have been found to account for a very modest, if not small, amount of variance in the outcome measures (Landy & Farr, 1983). We were more
interested, hence, in the presence of a significant relationship between the two sets of variables than in the amount of variance explained.

**METHOD**

Sample and Procedure

The sample comprised of 387 mid-level executives as focal managers (77% response rate) and 1,053 peers (91% response rate).

The focal managers were first asked to provide the names of five peers with whom they interacted most regularly at work. The researcher randomly picked three names from this list. A confidential questionnaire was sent to the focal manager and each peer. All completed instruments were returned directly to the researcher at the university.

Measures and Analysis

**Simple Demography.** Five direct demographic attributes were measured on each focal manager and each of their peers. These variables were age, company tenure, education, gender, and race. Age and company tenure were measured in years. Education was measured by seven levels ranging from 1 for high school to 7 for a doctorate degree. Gender and race were coded dichotomously, with 1 designating male and 2 designating female, and 1 for white and 2 for non-white, respectively.

**Relational Demography.** This was measured by the squared difference on a specific demographic attribute between the focal manager and each peer.

Two individuals identical on any demographic attribute would have a score of 0 on that attribute. Any difference would have a value greater than zero. Differences in age, company tenure, and education were measured by a continuous scale with large values denoting greater degree of difference. Differences in gender and race were measured simply by a score of 1, meaning that the focal manager was of a different gender or race from that of the peer. Table 1 shows the statistics of both the simple and the relational demographic variables.

**Feedback Seeking.** The feedback-seeking measures were taken from Ashford and Tsui (1991). For feedback seeking type, the focal manager's tendency to seek negative feedback $\alpha=.70$ and their tendency to seek positive feedback $\alpha=.72$ were measured by two items each, on a 5-point scale. Three feedback seeking methods were measured by three items each. They were inquiry $\alpha=.83$, direct cue monitoring $\alpha=.75$, and indirect cue monitoring $\alpha=.75$, also on a 5-point scale.

Regression analyses were used to test the specific hypotheses that specified the relationship between each of the demographic variables and each of the feedback seeking measures. The results are summarized in Table 2.

**RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

The coefficients on the relational measures showed some support for both Hypotheses 1 and 2. Differences in educational level were associated with greater use of the monitoring feedback cues. Differences in race were associated with less seeking of negative feedback. These results are consistent with Hypothesis 1.
TABLE 2. DEMOGRAPHIC DIVERSITY AND FEEDBACKSEEKING FROM PEERS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Demography Variables</th>
<th>Feedback Seeking Variables</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Positive Feedback</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Simple Demography - Focal Managers</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td>-.14***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education</td>
<td>.09***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender</td>
<td>-.09**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Race</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Company Tenure</td>
<td>.08*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Simple Demography - Peers</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td>.09*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education</td>
<td>.10*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Race</td>
<td>-.08*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Company Tenure</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relational Demography</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender</td>
<td>-.08*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Race</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Company Tenure</td>
<td>.08*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Model F</td>
<td>1.89*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>R²</td>
<td>0.03</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* p < .10, *p < .05, **p < .01, ***p < .001.  
NOTE: Only Betas with p < .10 are shown.

Differences in company tenure, however, were positively associated with the greater seeking of negative feedback. This result was consistent with H2 based on the self-regulation perspective.

The results on the direct demographic attributes of the focal managers seemed to suggest that the adaptive behavior of younger managers and managers of a minority race were consistent with the self-regulation perspective while the behavior of managers with a low educational level or with a short company tenure was not consistent with this perspective. For these managers, impression management concerns may dominate, causing them to avoid seeking in ways that expose their need for feedback. Finally, there was no relationship between gender of the managers and their feedback seeking behaviors.

The following results were obtained on the direct demographic attributes of the peers. Managers tended to seek more negative feedback from peers who were older rather than younger. They reported seeking more positive feedback from female peers. They used more indirect cue monitoring with minority peers. They reported seeking more negative feedback and a greater use of the inquiry method of seeking from peers who had a short rather than a long company tenure.

In summary, the results of this study provided some though weak support for the similarity-attraction hypothesis regarding the tendency of managers to not seek feedback from peers who might be demographically different. Evidence of similarity-attraction was found on only one, although a potentially important, demographic variable, i.e., differences in race between the focal managers and their peers. This difference was negatively associated with the seeking of negative feedback. Controlling for race differences, however, minority managers tended to report seeking more negative feedback and using the inquiry strategy more often than the non-minority managers. This implies that the feedback source for minority managers could be other minority peers. Age and company tenure were two other demographic variables that potentially were cues to the managers for the need to increase self-regulation activities. Managers were especially sensitive to peers who were new to the organization (i.e., short company tenure). They reporting asking for more negative feedback in a direct manner from these peers. Perhaps they saw themselves serving as mentors or as "buddies" to these new organizational members. It is also possible that these managers were least threatened by these new peers and saw it as an opportunity to build allies. Seeking information on one's performance may be an important gesture to build a friendship.

Of the three sets of demographic variables, the focal managers' own demographic characteristics seemed to have the biggest effect on their feedback-seeking behavior. This greater sensitivity to one's own characteristics, relative to the characteristics of others and to the difference between self and others, suggests
the need to consider other theoretical perspectives in explaining active feedback behavior of managers. For example, public versus private self-consciousness (Fenigstein, Scheier, & Buss, 1975) or impression management concerns (Schneider, 1981) might offer potentially more powerful insights into such behavior than the demography of the participants involved.

Clearly more work is needed to untangle the effects of demographic diversity in general, and demographic differences between managers and their constituents in specific, and on steps that managers take to address, cope with, and manage that diversity. The study reported in this paper has provided a step in this stream of research.

REFERENCES


