

# The ever-expanding definition of 'diversity'

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(Medical Xpress) -- Diversity has become a goal for all sorts of institutions—but what it means may depend on who you ask. A new study published in *Psychological Science*, a journal of the Association for Psychological Science, finds that people's ideologies help determine what they count as “diverse.”

Miguel Unzueta, the study's lead author, notes that “[diversity](#)” historically meant inclusiveness toward historically disadvantaged groups. Now, however, the term is commonly used to refer to [people](#) who are different in any way (even personality traits and food preferences)—and that, Dr. Unzueta argues, may be making the concept useless. Dr. Unzueta saw this play out first hand at the universities he was part of and the organizations he studied. “It seemed like everyone was very comfortable talking about diversity, but not really race and gender,” says Unzueta, of the Anderson School of Management and University of California, Los Angeles, who co-wrote the paper with Eric Knowles of the University of California, Irvine, and Geoffrey Ho of UCLA. “The problem is, we could all be talking about diversity and we could all mean different things. It's a very abstract, euphemistic catch-all.”

Unzueta and his colleagues designed an experiment to look at how people think about diversity. They recruited 300 people, mostly students and staff members at UCLA, to take an online survey. Each person saw a profile of a company, showing how many people there were of four different racial groups and four different occupations. Different people saw different combinations, such as low [racial diversity](#) and low

occupational diversity (mostly white and mostly engineers), low racial diversity but high occupational diversity, and so on. Then they were asked if the company was “diverse” or not.

How people responded depended on their ideology, particularly something called “social dominance orientation.” This is a basic motivation to either maintain the status quo or decrease inequality. People who score high in social dominance orientation are less egalitarian. When these people saw a company that was mostly white, but had fairly even numbers of engineers, accountants, consultants, and marketers, they declared it to be diverse. In the next phase of questions, they also said the company didn’t need affirmative action policies to improve its racial diversity. “By calling the company diverse, that allows them to oppose race-based affirmative action,” Unzueta says. People with low social dominance orientation thought occupationally unbalanced companies lacked diversity—even if the company had high racial diversity. This allowed egalitarian-minded people to legitimize support for race-based affirmative action policies since the organization in question was seen as lacking diversity. Thus, across the range of [social dominance](#) orientation, people leveraged demographic ambiguity in ways that justified their preexisting policy preferences.

It’s clear that some people thought having a roughly equivalent number of engineers, accountants, consultants, and marketers made a company “diverse.” That has nothing to do with what “diversity” was originally used to describe, and accountants aren’t a group that needs policies to make up for historical disadvantages. “One thing I hope this work is starting to make clear is that to talk about issues of fairness, social justice, and group-based equality, we can’t be using euphemisms,” Unzueta says. “If a [company](#) really does want to have a racially diverse workforce, talk about race. Don’t hide behind diversity.”

**More information:** [www.psychologicalscience.org/i ...](http://www.psychologicalscience.org/i...)

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Provided by Association for Psychological Science

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