

What does 'diversity' mean to you? The answer may depend on your race

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Diversity in the workplace has been a contentious issue for many employers. In May 2014, [Google disclosed](#) that 70% of its employees are male, and in terms of racial diversity, the company is 61% White, 30% Asian, 3% Hispanic and 2% Black. Does that breakdown sound diverse to you? If not, what would an ideal diverse team look like? A study publishing in *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin* sheds light on the complexity in defining diversity.

Previous research has shown that higher levels of diversity are associated with more trust, increased feelings of safety and social satisfaction, and heightened expectations that people can expect to be treated fairly and have the same opportunities as others in an organization. Researchers from the University of California at Irvine, the University of Virginia, and the University of California at Los Angeles collaborated to study how Whites, Asian Americans, and African Americans evaluate diversity. The research included three studies, and participants were asked to rate the diversity of various groups of people that were presented as a team at work.

Differing Perceptions of Diversity

Studies 1 and 2 found that in-group representation—that is, seeing members of one's own race included in the group— increased perceived diversity, even when the number of racial groups and number of racial minority [group members](#) was held constant. Asian Americans perceived

more diversity in a group that included Whites and Asian Americans than a group that included Whites and African Americans. African Americans rated a group with Whites and African Americans as more diverse than one with Whites and Asian Americans.

Studies 2 and 3 showed that concerns about discrimination play a role in why racial minority group members are especially attuned to whether their race is represented. Study 2 showed that in-group representation had a larger effect on diversity judgments made by Asian Americans who considered national statistics about discrimination against Asian Americans before judging diversity than those who did not. Also, the in-group representation effect disappeared when Asian Americans first considered national statistics about discrimination against African Americans; these individuals rated a team of Whites and African Americans as equally diverse as a team of Whites and Asians. Study 3 measured concerns about diversity and showed that it mediated the relation between team composition and diversity judgments.

Importance of Diversity

The studies identified differences in how Asian Americans and African Americans judge diversity. In-group representation was generally more important to African Americans than Asian Americans, and in-group representation was equally important for African Americans regardless of whether they considered discrimination against African Americans, Asian Americans, or did not consider discrimination before judging diversity. Therefore, people—especially scholars, managers, and policy makers—should be careful not to assume that all racial [minority groups](#) approach questions about diversity in the same way. Lead researcher Christopher Bauman notes that, "More research needs to consider the unique perspective of each racial group. A lot of valuable insights have come from research that contrasted majority and minority groups, but finer grained analysis will become increasingly important as the country

continues to become more diverse."

The research illustrates that people from different races may view the same team or organization and judge it differently in terms of whether or not it's diverse. "Racial minority group members care whether or not members of their own race are part of a team. While the presence of other minority groups is better than no diversity at all, it's not the same as having someone of your own race present," Dr. Bauman says, "You can't lump racial minority groups together and treat them as a monolithic whole. Each racial group has its own history and faces unique challenges, and it should not be surprising that they approach situations differently." Understanding how individuals experience [diversity](#) in the [workplace](#) is a much more complex issue than simply knowing the percentage of each race present in a team or organization.

More information: Bauman, C.W., Trawalter, S., Unzueta, M.M. (2014). Diverse According to Whom? Racial Group Membership and Concerns about Discrimination Shape Diversity Judgments. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, 40(10).

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