# Psychological Science

**Diversity Is What You Want It to Be : How Social-Dominance Motives Affect Construals of Diversity**

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What is This?

# Diversity Is What You Want It to Be: How Social-Dominance Motives Affect Construals of Diversity

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## Abstract

We propose that diversity is a malleable concept capable of being used either to attenuate or to enhance racial inequality. The research reported here suggests that when people are exposed to ambiguous information concerning an organization's diversity, they construe diversity in a manner consistent with their social-dominance motives. Specifically, anti-egalitarian individuals broaden their construal of diversity to include nonracial (i.e., occupational) heterogeneity when an organization's racial heterogeneity is low. By contrast, egalitarian individuals broaden their construal of diversity to include nonracial heterogeneity when an organization's racial heterogeneity is high. The inclusion of occupational heterogeneity in perceptions of diversity allows people across the spectrum of social-dominance orientation to justify their support for or opposition to hierarchy-attenuating affirmative-action policies. Our findings suggest that diversity may not have a fixed meaning and that, without a specific delineation of what the concept means in particular contexts, people may construe diversity in a manner consistent with their social motivations.

## Keywords

Diversity is the existence of many unique individuals in the workplace, marketplace, and community. This includes men and women from different nations, cultures, ethnic groups, generations, backgrounds, skills, abilities, and all the other unique differences that make each of us who we are. (Hewlett-Packard Development Company, 2010, para. 1)

*Diversity* is a concept celebrated by many organizations (Bunn & LaCour, 2009; Kidder, Lankau, Chrobot-Mason, Mollica, & Friedman, 2004; Kochan et al., 2003; Linnehan & Konrad, 1999; Richard, 2000). Yet, despite the amount of attention diversity receives, the concept is neither clearly defined nor well understood by the general public. The tendency to define diversity as heterogeneity in a wide range of demographic dimensions (as in the preceding quotation) may contribute to this lack of clarity. Given diversity's ambiguous meaning, people may strategically construe the concept in a manner consistent with their desire to preserve or reduce inequality along socially important dimensions, such as race. In the research reported here, we explored whether diversity is, in

fact, a malleable concept capable of serving opposing social agendas.

## Diversity's Unclear Meaning

Discourse on diversity has evolved from referring specifically to the advancement of race-based civil-rights legislation in employment contexts to include a broad range of demographic dimensions not protected by law (Edelman, Riggs Fuller, & Mara-Drita, 2001). For example, in present-day research on organizational behavior, diversity has been defined as "the distribution of differences among the members of a unit with respect to a common attribute X, such as tenure, ethnicity, conscientiousness, task attitude, or pay" (Harrison & Klein, 2007, p. 1200) and, more simply, as heterogeneity in "personality

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attributes, personal values, work attitudes, education, and lifestyle" (Laio, Chuang, & Joshi, 2008, p. 112). Thus, diversity now seems to encompass heterogeneity in a wide range of dimensions—not just racial composition, as was originally intended when the term came into common use (Edelman et al., 2001).

Research on laypeople's understanding of diversity also suggests an unclear conception of the term. For example, Bell and Hartmann (2007) found that people define diversity in broad terms that include a wide range of demographic dimensions (e.g., race, religion, parenting style, age, and education). Other research has suggested that even when diversity is construed in racial terms, people disagree about which particular groups are most associated with diversity. Specifically, Unzueta and Binning (2010) found that members of minority groups (i.e., Asians, Latinos, and African Americans) perceive diversity as primarily entailing the representation of their in-group. It appears that, among both academics and laypeople, diversity is a poorly defined concept assumed to refer to a wide and shifting set of demographic dimensions.

In light of diversity's unclear meaning, we suggest that people may construe diversity in a manner consistent with their social motivations (see Kunda, 1990). Specifically, we propose that, as a function of their desire for intergroup inequality, people may strategically construe diversity in ways that enhance or attenuate racial inequality.

## Motivated Construals of Diversity

Recent research has suggested that people construe widely embraced sociopolitical ideologies in ways that serve their social agendas. For instance, Knowles, Lowery, Hogan, and Chow (2009) examined how the desire for intergroup inequality—specifically, social-dominance orientation (SDO; Sidanius & Pratto, 1999)—guides construals of "color-blind" ideology. Specifically, when they were subtly reminded of the existing racial order, anti-egalitarian (high-SDO) Whites construed color blindness as a procedural ideology that prohibits the consideration of race in the distribution of social resources, even if such a prohibition perpetuates disparate outcomes among people of different races. Conversely, egalitarian (low-SDO) Whites who were similarly reminded of the existing racial hierarchy construed color blindness as a distributive ideology that permits a race-conscious allocation of resources in order to prevent racially unequal outcomes (so that outcomes, rather than procedures, will be color-blind).

We propose that diversity, like color blindness, is a concept that people may use to legitimize their attitudes toward inequality—and that diversity may thus be construed strategically to satisfy underlying motivations regarding intergroup inequality (see also Haley & Sidanius, 2006). Following Knowles, Lowery, Hogan, & Chow (2009), we chose to examine construals of diversity in the context of race, given evidence that race is a central focus of social-dominance concerns in the United States (Sidanius & Pratto, 1999).

There is reason to believe that perceptions of diversity serve a legitimizing function. People may take an organization's perceived diversity to indicate that it requires no further efforts to promote diversity, such as affirmative-action policies. Conversely, deeming an organization as lacking in diversity may serve as grounds to maintain support for policies that potentially remedy inequality. If this explanation is correct, then anti-egalitarian individuals should strive to see organizations as (already) diverse, whereas egalitarian individuals should want to see organizations as not (yet) diverse.

People's perceptions of an organization's diversity are likely tied to objective features of the organization in question. Thus, almost everyone is likely to perceive an organization whose workforce is 30% Black as more diverse than an organization whose workforce is only 2% Black (see Unzueta & Binning, 2012). However, we argue that certain organizational contexts open the door for motivated construals of diversity that people can use to justify perceptions of more or less diversity, depending on their level of egalitarianism. Given that contemporary definitions of diversity often include multiple demographic dimensions (Bell & Hartmann, 2007; Edelman et al., 2001), we propose that people may strategically broaden or narrow their conception of diversity to include or exclude nonracial dimensions—such as occupational heterogeneity—in order to justify attitudes toward policies that may affect racial inequality.

## The Present Research

Our study was designed to test whether people broaden (or narrow) their conception of diversity in order to legitimize support for or opposition to hierarchy-attenuating policies. To this end, we presented participants with differing descriptions of a fictitious organization, manipulating the organization's degree of racial and nonracial (i.e., occupational) heterogeneity. By manipulating these dimensions, we were able to assess the extent to which people included or excluded the occupational dimension in their construals of diversity.

We predicted that when anti-egalitarian (high-SDO) participants were presented with an organization low in racial heterogeneity but high in occupational heterogeneity, they would broaden their construal of diversity to include occupational heterogeneity; we predicted that under the same conditions, egalitarian (low-SDO) participants would instead maintain a narrow construal of diversity that centered on race. A broad construal of diversity may allow anti-egalitarian individuals to justify their opposition to policies that promote racial diversity, as such a construal permits occupationally heterogeneous organizations to be seen as already having achieved diversity.

We also predicted that presenting participants with an organization characterized by high racial heterogeneity but low occupational heterogeneity would yield a mirror-image pattern of results, such that egalitarian participants would broaden their construal of diversity to encompass the occupational

dimension and anti-egalitarian participants would limit their construal of diversity to include only race. In this case, broadly construing diversity to include occupational heterogeneity would allow egalitarian participants to legitimize their support for race-based affirmative-action policies, because such a construal would allow the organization to be perceived as lacking diversity. Thus, we expect that participants across the spectrum of egalitarianism will leverage demographic ambiguity in ways that justify their preexisting policy-related preferences.

Moreover, if perceptions of diversity serve a legitimizing function, they should mediate the relationship between SDO and support for affirmative-action policies (Sidanius & Pratto, 1999)—but only in situations that allow for motivated construals (i.e., when an organization's overall level of diversity is ambiguous). When demographic information presents an unambiguous picture of an organization's level of diversity— that is, when both racial and occupational diversity are low or high—people are unlikely to construe diversity in ways that justify support for or opposition to affirmative-action policies. In this context, perceptions of diversity should not mediate the link between SDO and support for affirmative action. Thus, we predicted a moderated mediation pattern (Muller, Judd, & Yzerbyt, 2005) whereby perceptions of diversity would mediate the link between SDO and support for affirmative-action policies when demographic ambiguity was high (i.e., when one dimension of heterogeneity was high and the other was low), but not when demographic ambiguity was low (i.e., when both racial and nonracial dimensions of heterogeneity were high or low).

## Method
### Participants

The sample consisted of 304 people (152 women, 151 men, 1 person who did not report his or her gender) recruited from a database consisting primarily of undergraduates and staff members at the University of California, Los Angeles. Participants were paid $3 for completing a Web-based survey. Participants' ages ranged from 18 to 66 years ($M$ = 28.07, $SD$ = 10.60). The racial composition of the sample was as follows: 3 Native Americans, 75 Asians, 9 African Americans, 184 Whites, 19 Latinos, and 14 multiracial individuals.

### Procedure

Participants were presented with a description of an organization that had either a high or a low level of racial heterogeneity and either a high or a low level of nonracial (i.e., occupational) heterogeneity. For all participants, the description began as follows:

> Strathmore International is a product-design firm operating in California that specializes in the development

of solar energy technology. Recently, Strathmore conducted an internal audit on the diversity of its workforce. Below are the results of the audit.

At this point, participants were presented with two tables (to view the tables used in each condition, see the Supplemental Material available online). The table on the left depicted the racial composition of Strathmore, and the table on the right depicted the organization's occupational composition. Both tables varied by experimental condition (described in the following paragraphs). Participants then reported demographic information and responded to several items that assessed perceptions of the organization's diversity, support for race-based affirmative-action policies, and SDO. Finally, participants were given a written debriefing statement.

### Independent variables

**Racial heterogeneity.** Participants were randomly assigned to one of two racial-heterogeneity conditions (low or high). In the low-racial-heterogeneity condition, the organization's workforce comprised 5 African Americans, 8 Latinos, 81 Whites, and 7 Asians. In the high-racial-heterogeneity condition, the organization was said to have 14 African Americans, 21 Latinos, 48 Whites, and 18 Asians.[1]

**Occupational heterogeneity.** Participants were randomly assigned to one of two occupational-heterogeneity conditions (low or high). In the low-occupational-heterogeneity condition, the organization's workforce comprised 79 engineers, 9 accountants, 3 consultants, and 10 marketers. In the high-occupational-heterogeneity condition, the organization was said to have 46 engineers, 20 accountants, 12 consultants, and 23 marketers.

**Social-dominance orientation.** Participants' level of egalitarian motivation was assessed using the eight-item Social Dominance Orientation Scale (Sidanius & Pratto, 1999). Sample items include "To get ahead in life, it is sometimes necessary to step on other groups of people" and "We should strive for increased social equality between groups" (reverse-scored). Participants responded to these items using a scale from 1, *strongly disagree*, to 7, *strongly agree* ($M$ = 2.33, $SD$ = 0.98; = .83).

### Dependent variables

**Perceived diversity.** Participants' perceptions of the organization's diversity were assessed with the following three items (Unzueta & Binning, 2012): "Strathmore has a high level of diversity," "Strathmore is a diverse organization," and "Strathmore has very little diversity" (reverse-scored). Participants responded to these items using a scale from 1, *strongly disagree*, to 7, *strongly agree* ($M$ = 4.04, $SD$ = 1.78; = .94).

***Support for affirmative action.*** Support for affirmative action was assessed with a four-item scale (Lowery, Knowles, & Unzueta, 2007), which consisted of descriptions of four specific race-based affirmative-action policies.[2] After reading each description, participants were asked, "To what extent would you oppose/support this policy if it were actually implemented?" Participants responded to all items using a scale from 1, *strongly oppose*, to 7, *strongly support* ($M = 3.45$, $SD = 1.08$;  = .60).

## Results

Neither participant's gender nor participant's race had main or interaction effects when they were included in our analyses, so we collapsed the data across these variables. Participant's age, however, was positively associated with perceived diversity, $r = .22$, $p < .01$, and was negatively associated with support for affirmative action, $r = -.22$, $p < .01$. Therefore, in order to isolate the effects of primary interest, we controlled for age in our analyses. The experimental manipulations had no effect on participants' levels of SDO, which allowed us to use SDO as a predictor in our analyses. Means and correlations between measured variables are shown in Table 1.

We conducted a linear regression analysis in which perceived diversity was regressed on racial heterogeneity, occupational heterogeneity, SDO, the interactions of these variables, and the age covariate. SDO and age were mean-centered, and the heterogeneity variables were effect-coded ($-1$ = low; 1 = high), following Aiken and West (1991). The analysis revealed significant main effects of racial heterogeneity, $b = 1.10$, $SE b = 0.08$,  = 0.62, $p < .001$, and occupational heterogeneity, $b = 0.23$, $SE b = 0.08$,  = 0.13, $p < .01$, as well

**Table 1.** Means, Standard Deviations, and Correlations Among Measured Variables

| Variable | M | SD | Correlations | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| | | | 1 | 2 |
| 1. Social-dominance orientation | 2.33 | 0.98 | | |
| 2. Perceived diversity | 4.04 | 1.78 | .05 | |
| 3. Support for affirmative action | 3.45 | 1.08 | −.29* | −.22* |

*$p < .01$.

as the predicted SDO × Racial Heterogeneity × Occupational Heterogeneity interaction, $b = -0.24$, $SE b = 0.08$,  = $-0.13$, $p < .01$. Simple-effects tests were conducted to decompose the observed three-way interaction (Aiken & West, 1991).

### *Low racial heterogeneity*

Simple-effects tests revealed that the two-way interaction between SDO and occupational heterogeneity was significant in the low-racial-heterogeneity condition, $b = 0.23$, $SE b = 0.11$, $t(299) = 2.06$,  = 0.13, $p = .04$ (Fig. 1). Further decomposition of this interaction showed that SDO was positively associated with perceived diversity in the high-occupational-heterogeneity condition, $b = 0.33$, $SE b = 0.15$, $t(299) = 2.16$,  = 0.18 $p = .03$, but not in the low-occupational-heterogeneity condition, $b = -0.13$, $SE b = 0.16$, $t(299) = -0.81$,  = $-0.07$, $p = .42$.

Examining the interaction another way, we found that occupational heterogeneity increased perceived diversity for high-SDO participants, $b = 0.43$, $SE b = 0.16$, $t(299) = 2.69$,
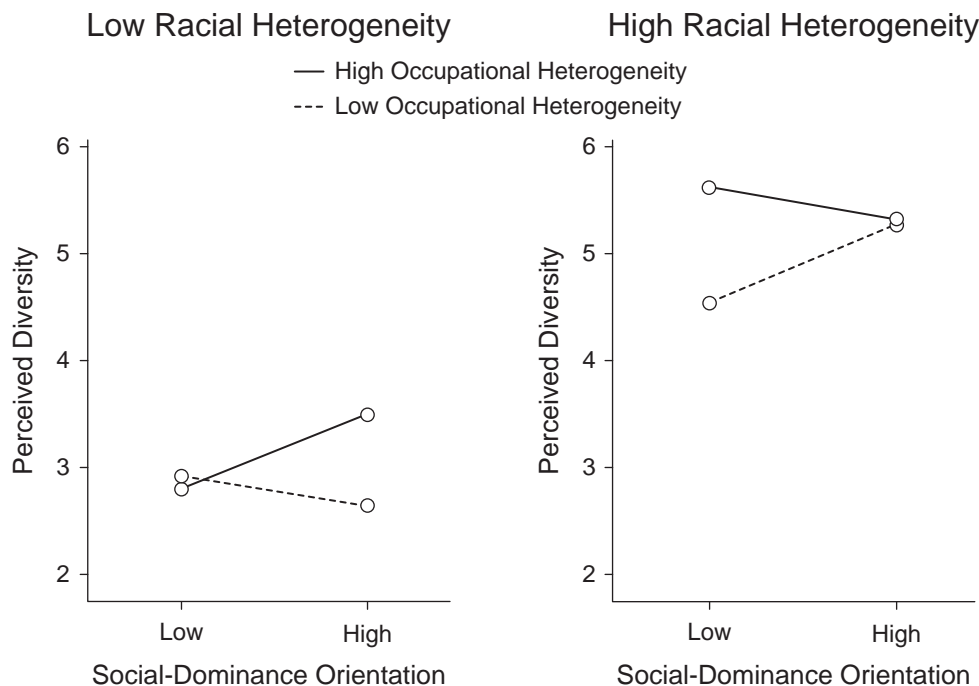


**Fig. 1.** Perceived diversity as a function of social-dominance orientation and occupational heterogeneity for participants in the low-racial-heterogeneity and high-racial-heterogeneity conditions.

= 0.24, *p* = .01, but not low-SDO participants, *b* = −0.05, *SE b* = 0.15, *t*(299) = −0.32, = −0.03, *p* = .75. These results suggest that when assessing the diversity of an organization with little racial heterogeneity, people high in SDO expanded their construal of diversity to include the occupational dimension, whereas those low in SDO restricted their construal of diversity to the domain of race.

### High racial heterogeneity

Within the high-racial-heterogeneity condition, simple-effects tests revealed a significant two-way interaction between SDO and occupational heterogeneity, *b* = −0.25, *SE b* = 0.11, *t*(299) = −2.25, = −0.14, *p* = .02 (Fig. 1). Further decomposition of this interaction showed that SDO was positively associated with perceived diversity in the low-occupational-heterogeneity condition, *b* = 0.35, *SE b* = 0.16, *t*(299) = 2.24, = 0.19, *p* = .03, but not in the high-occupational-heterogeneity condition, *b* = −0.14, *SE b* = 0.15, *t*(299) = −0.92, = −0.08, *p* = .36.

Examining the interaction another way, we found that occupational heterogeneity increased perceived diversity for low-SDO participants, *b* = 0.52, *SE b* = 0.16, *t*(299) = 3.34, = 0.30, *p* < .01, but not high-SDO participants, *b* = 0.01, *SE b* = 0.16, *t*(299) = 0.06, = 0.01, *p* = .94. These results are the mirror image of those in the low-racial-heterogeneity condition. Specifically, when assessing the diversity of an organization high in racial heterogeneity, participants low in SDO expanded their construal of diversity to include occupational representation, whereas their high-SDO counterparts restricted their construal of diversity to the domain of race.

### Mediation analyses

We predicted that the inclusion of occupational heterogeneity in construals of diversity would serve a legitimizing function for both low-SDO and high-SDO individuals. When racial heterogeneity was low, we expected that high-SDO participants would broaden their construal of diversity to justify opposition to policies that promote racial equality. When racial heterogeneity was high, we expected that low-SDO participants would broaden their construal of diversity for the opposite reason: to justify continued support for policies that might further attenuate racial hierarchy.

According to social-dominance theory, a belief, attitude, or perception serves a legitimizing function if it mediates the relationship between social-dominance motivation and support for a specific social policy (Sidanius & Pratto, 1999). In the current context, this pattern should have occurred only when the organization's level of diversity was ambiguous—that is, when the organization had either high racial heterogeneity or high occupational heterogeneity, but not both. When an organization is thus characterized by *high construability*, perceivers have latitude to actively broaden or narrow their conception of diversity for legitimizing purposes. In contrast, when racial and occupational heterogeneity were both either high or low, participants' assessments of the organization's diversity were constrained. When an organization is characterized by *low construability*, perceivers may not be able to modify their construals of diversity in order to legitimize their policy preferences. This reasoning led us to predict a moderated mediation pattern (Muller et al., 2005) in which perceptions of diversity would mediate the relationship between SDO and support for affirmative-action policies when racial heterogeneity was high and occupational heterogeneity was low or vice versa (conditions of high construability), but not when the two dimensions of heterogeneity were both high or both low (conditions of low construability).

To test this prediction, we used Preacher, Rucker, and Hayes's (2007) MODMED macro for SPSS Version 19.0, which provides bias-corrected and bootstrapped estimates of indirect effects (Shrout & Bolger, 2002) at specific levels of a moderator. We first created an effect-coded variable representing the match between levels of racial and occupational heterogeneity and thus the construability of the organization (−1 = match, or low construability; 1 = mismatch, or high construability). We then ran the analysis, specifying SDO as the independent variable, support for affirmative action as the dependent variable, perceived diversity as the mediator, construability as the moderator, and age as a covariate. Twenty thousand bootstrap samples were used. The analysis revealed that perceived diversity conveyed a significant negative indirect effect of SDO on support for affirmative action in the high-construability conditions, *b* = −0.04, *SE b* = 0.02, 95% confidence interval (CI) = [−0.092, −0.007]. However, no significant indirect effect emerged in the low-construability conditions, *b* = 0.01, *SE b* = 0.02, 95% CI = [−0.030, 0.059]. These results suggest that participants in the high-construability conditions used their construals of diversity to legitimize their opposition to or support for race-based affirmative action.

## General Discussion

Our findings suggest that diversity may be in the eye of the beholder. Participants in this study altered their conception of diversity to include or exclude a nonracial dimension (i.e., occupational heterogeneity) in a manner that allowed them to legitimize attitudes toward policies that affect racial hierarchy. Anti-egalitarian participants—that is, participants high in SDO—regarded high levels of occupational heterogeneity as contributing to the overall diversity of a racially homogeneous organization. In contrast, egalitarian participants (i.e., participants low in SDO) saw low levels of occupational heterogeneity as detracting from the diversity of a racially heterogeneous organization. These patterns of findings are consistent with the idea that perceptions of diversity can function to enhance or attenuate hierarchy. The fact that perceptions of diversity mediated the relationship between SDO and support for race-based affirmative action when demographic information painted an ambiguous (and thus construable) portrait of an

organization's overall level of diversity constitutes direct evidence for this claim.

### Why support affirmative action in an already diverse organization?

One potentially counterintuitive aspect of our findings concerns the behavior of low-SDO (i.e., relatively egalitarian) individuals. When egalitarian individuals were presented with an organization high in racial heterogeneity, those in the low-occupational-heterogeneity condition perceived the organization to be less diverse than did those in the high-occupational-heterogeneity condition. This pattern, we have argued, reflects low-SDO participants' attempt to justify support for race-based affirmative-action policies. Thus, it appears that egalitarian people support affirmative-action policies even in contexts where such policies may not be necessary—that is, in organizations that have already achieved racial diversity. Why would egalitarian people support a policy whose goals have already been met? We propose two possible explanations for this finding.

First, low-SDO individuals may believe that maintaining racial diversity depends on the continued use of affirmative action. Just as high-SDO individuals strive not only to create but also to maintain high levels of intergroup hierarchy, low-SDO individuals may seek to ensure that highly diverse organizations stay that way. If this explanation is correct, then high levels of racial diversity do not guarantee that egalitarian people will stop supporting affirmative action—or attempting to rationalize that support through motivated perceptions of diversity.

Second, low-SDO participants' support for race-based affirmative action in an already diverse organization may have had more to do with identity than with their appraisal of the organization's needs. More specifically, low-SDO individuals may have adhered to a view of policy that was important to their identity: Supporting efforts to increase the number of members of historically disadvantaged group in the workforce may be a moral mandate for egalitarian people (Skitka, 2002) or may even be a party line by which egalitarian people think they and like-minded individuals ought to abide (Cohen, 2003).

### The symmetry of high-SDO and low-SDO behavior

Research on social-dominance theory has often treated the behavior of people low in SDO as a baseline against which to compare the behavior of those high in SDO (e.g., Knowles, Lowery, Hogan, & Chow, 2009; Knowles, Lowery, & Schaumberg, 2009). However, it is important to remember that social-dominance theory is a general account of how people—whether low or high in SDO—attempt to rationalize attitudes about policies that cohere with their intergroup motivations. The present findings illustrate a context in which egalitarians and anti-egalitarians engage in "equal but opposite" legitimizing behavior: Just as high-SDO participants broadened their construal of diversity to include the occupational dimension when doing so might delegitimize affirmative action, their low-SDO counterparts adopted a similarly broad construal of diversity when doing so legitimized support for this policy.

Given the mirror-image symmetry in perceptions of diversity among low-SDO and high-SDO participants, future research should explore whether people with high and low levels of SDO experience dissonance when their construals of diversity change on the basis of changes in the demographics of organizations they are evaluating. In addition, future research should assess whether perceptions of gender diversity are as fungible as perceptions of racial diversity.

## Conclusion

Diversity is a concept that is widely discussed yet poorly understood (Bell & Hartmann, 2007; Unzueta & Binning, 2010). The lack of clarity in diversity's meaning may make the concept appealing to both people with egalitarian motives and people with anti-egalitarian motives. If diversity's meaning can shift in accordance with people's social motivations, then the present research calls into question the wisdom of using the "pursuit of diversity" as a rationale for attaining racial equality within organizations. Rather than creating a more welcoming environment for underrepresented minorities, attempts to achieve equitable racial representation via the euphemistic and unspecific pursuit of diversity may inadvertently allow people to turn diversity into whatever they want it to be.

### Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The authors declared that they had no conflicts of interest with respect to their authorship or the publication of this article.

### Supplemental Material

Additional supporting information may be found at http://pss.sagepub .com/content/by/supplemental-data

### Notes

1. The percentages of participants of different races in the high-racial-heterogeneity condition were loosely based on the racial composition of California because the company in the vignette was based in California and a majority of the participants lived in California.
2. Specifically, participants rated *outreach, supplemental-training, tiebreaker*, and *minimum-qualification* policies. The outreach policy was described as advertising job openings in minority-targeted media without considering race in actual employment decisions. The supplemental-training policy was described as providing members of minority groups with extra training. The tiebreaker policy was described as giving preference to a minority applicant over a White applicant when the two applicants were equally qualified. The minimum-qualification policy was described as giving preference to a minority applicant over a White applicant as long as the minority-group member met a minimal level of qualifications.

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