Attitudes toward diversity initiatives: The role of initiative content, gender, and modern sexism/racism

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Introduction
A popular strategy for promoting workplace diversity is to provide special programs (e.g., mentoring, networking events) exclusively to women and underrepresented minorities (URM), yet little work has examined employee attitudes toward these programs. We predicted that company diversity initiatives would be perceived less positively when they primarily consisted of only one type of initiative, namely either URM-exclusive programs or programs open to all employees (all-inclusive programs). We expected trends to be moderated by employee gender and Modern Sexism and Racism (MSR), such that men and those high in MSR would be less supportive of initiatives that were primarily URM-exclusive, whereas women and those low in MSR would be less supportive of initiatives that were primarily all-inclusive.

Method

Participants
Full-time working adults (107 women, 102 men) were recruited from Mturk to complete a survey of workplace attitudes. Most participants identified as white (80%), black (7%), Latinx (5%), or Asian (5%). Mean age = 37 (SD=11).

Predictor Variables
Participants indicated from a list of initiatives which ones were implemented by their company. The list contained 7 URM-exclusive initiatives, 8 all-inclusive initiatives, and 7 initiatives aimed at eliminating bias and discrimination. From these responses we calculated:
- Total initiatives
- Proportion of URM-exclusive initiatives
- Proportion of all-inclusive initiatives

Moderator Variables:
- Participant Gender
- Modern Sexism and Racism (MSR): 15 items (Swim et al., 1995; McConahay, 1986). “Discrimination is no longer a problem” (α = .95)

Outcome Variables:
Response scale: 1=strongly disagree, 7=strongly agree
- General Attitudes: 7 items: "I am glad my company implements the diversity initiatives they do" (α = .92)
- Perceived benefits: 5 items: "I think the diversity initiatives at my company give the company a competitive edge" (α = .82)
- Unfair: 4 items: "I think the diversity initiatives at my company provide some groups with an unfair advantage" (α = .87)
- Feel excluded: 5 items: "I feel excluded by the diversity initiatives at my company" (α = .85)

Notes:
All interactions were significant (p<.05). ◆ indicates significant simple effect at level of moderator (p<.05). Total initiatives was significant covariate in all analyses. Same pattern of results if analyze Modern Sexism and Modern Racism separately. MSR remains significant moderator when control for Gender. Gender remains significant moderator when control for MSR, except on General Attitudes where the interaction is no longer significant.

Conclusion
Overall, employee attitudes toward diversity initiatives were more positive when companies implemented a larger number of initiatives; however, the content of the initiatives mattered. Initiatives that consisted primarily of URM-exclusive programming were viewed negatively by those high in MSR and by men, but positively by those low in MSR and women. By contrast, initiatives that primarily consisted of all-inclusive programming (open to all employees) were viewed positively by those high in MSR and by men, but negatively by those low in MSR and women. These results suggest diversity strategies may benefit from implementing a large number of initiatives and focusing on both exclusive and inclusive programs rather than prioritizing one type.