Drawing on Social Psychology Literature to Understand and Reduce Workplace Discrimination

DANIEL R. ABBEN, SHANIQUE G. BROWN, VERENA GRAUPMANN, STEFANIE A. MOCKLER, AND GREGORY F. FERNANDES
DePaul University

In their focal article, Lindsey, King, Dunleavy, McCausland, and Jones (2013) note that as industrial–organizational (I–O) psychologists, we can turn to other domains to help us identify strategies for reducing discrimination. We agree. In this response, we turn to social psychology, which traditionally looks at the interplay between situations and people. We believe that classic social psychological theories such as dissonance, reactance, social information processing (SIP), and social identity can shed light on the issue of workplace discrimination, as they point to the underlying motives that guide people's behavior. With the help of such theories, we can determine ways to avoid threats to these motives when working toward reducing the effects of discrimination in the workplace. These theories have been integrated into the I–O literature previously, but here we specifically identify ways in which they can be used to reduce discrimination in the areas of employee attraction, selection, inclusion, and retention.

Social Psychology Theory

Dissonance. Cognitive dissonance refers to a state of aversive tension that arises when behaviors are inconsistent with cognitions (Festinger, 1957; Festinger & Carlsmith, 1959). Because people want their thoughts and behaviors to make sense, individuals are generally motivated to reduce dissonance by changing their behaviors, changing their cognitions, or by adding information to reestablish consistency (Festinger, 1957). Dissonance is salient in I–O psychology as it can arise when individuals do not receive outputs consistent with their inputs, such as perceived pay inequity (Wood & Lawler, 1970) or overqualification (Erdogan, Bauer, Peiro, & Truxillo, 2011). In addition, cognitive dissonance has been examined from a motivational standpoint, specifically within Adams's (1965) equity theory.

Reactance. The theory of psychological reactance posits that people believe that they have certain freedoms and that they exhibit reactance when they perceive their freedoms to be restricted (Brehm, 1966; Brehm & Brehm, 1981). Reactance is a motivational state that is directed toward reclaiming control over a given situation. Often this is accompanied by defensiveness whereby individuals react against something even if it could have positive implications. The theory of psychological reactance has frequently been utilized in the I–O literature. For example, it has been used to explain diversity training backlash (Pendry, Driscoll, & Field, 2007), the usefulness of feedback (Kluger &

Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Daniel R. Abben.
E-mail: dabben@depaul.edu
Address: Department of Psychology, DePaul University, 2219 N. Kenmore Avenue, Chicago, IL 60614

DeNisi, 1996), employees' engagement in deviant behavior (Lawrence & Robinson, 2007), and employees' propensity to feel self-determined and intrinsically motivated (Deci, Connell, & Ryan, 1989).

Social information processing. SIP theory suggests that to construct and adapt to reality, individuals form perceptions based on interactions within their social environments, which subsequently inform their future actions. Contextual information that influences attitudes and behaviors includes past behaviors and the perceived views of relevant others. The extent to which social information influences behavior depends on the salience of the information, one's commitment to the behavior, and the need to rationalize one's actions as being socially acceptable (Salancik & Pfeffer, 1978). Given the microcosmic nature of organizational life, SIP is relevant to multiple organizational processes. As with the broader social world, employees are influenced by informational cues that are congruent with the conditions within their environment. Existing I–O research has used the SIP perspective to examine workplace attitudes, behaviors, and perceptions (Zalesny & Ford, 1990), as well as the influence that affective states have on judgments and decision making (Forgas & George, 2001), all of which relate to how individuals perceive increases in diversity.

Social identity theory. Social identity theory suggests that an individual's self-concept comprises a personal and a social identity. The personal identity includes all those attributes that are unique to the individual, whereas the social identity includes attributes that are based on the individual's membership to a particular social group (Turner, Brown, & Tajfel, 1979). This theory assumes that individuals are motivated to maintain a positive self-image. When this image is threatened, members of a social group, or ingroup, can enhance their self-esteem by comparing their ingroup to a relevant outgroup. A comparison that is favorable toward the ingroup provides a positive group identity, thereby enhancing members' self-esteem (Turner et al., 1979).

This theory suggests that when members of an ingroup feel threatened, they might seek to elevate their self-esteem by adopting prejudicial attitudes and engaging in discriminatory behaviors toward members of various outgroups. Shih, Young, and Bucher (2013) suggest that victimized outgroup members can use identity management strategies to reduce the effects of discrimination. Similarly, research on social identity complexity, or the awareness that one's group memberships do not overlap (e.g., being an Asian female librarian while knowing that not all members of the ingroup Asian are also librarians, or female), suggests that individuals with high social identity complexity are more tolerant of outgroup members (Roccas & Brewer, 2002).

Reducing Workplace Discrimination

Social psychology has played an important role in the advancement of I–O psychology, especially in the areas of diversity and inclusion. We suggest that further application of existing social psychology theory can help us better understand and reduce workplace discrimination in the areas of employee attraction, selection, inclusion, and retention. In the following section, we provide examples of how social psychology theory can be applied to each of these topics.

Attraction. A social psychology perspective can help organizations attract individuals whose minority status might not be obvious (e.g., creed, disability status, or sexual orientation). In terms of attraction, cognitive dissonance arises when individuals who belong to invisible minority groups are attracted to organizations that do not support these groups. For example, a lesbian may be attracted to working for a company that does not offer same-sex health benefits. This causes conflict between a cognition (i.e., I am a lesbian) and a behavior (i.e.,

I am interested in applying for a job at a company that does not support LGBT employees). The resulting dissonance may have a negative impact on organizations in at least two ways. First, high-quality candidates may self-select out of selection processes. Second, candidates who are hired might resolve dissonance by changing their behaviors (i.e., by engaging in counterproductive work behaviors). In a similar vein, candidates from a minority background who believe that companies undervalue their ingroups might not apply for jobs or might show lower performance motivation, as the company-related social identity might threaten the social identity related to their ingroups.

A potential solution is for organizations to demonstrate that they value members of invisible minority groups. This can be done in some of the same subtle ways Lindsey et al. suggested recruiting members of visible minority groups, for example, by using recruitment and application materials that show support for minority group members. One concrete way that organizations can do this is to include their Human Rights Campaign Corporate Equality Index score on recruitment materials.

Selection. Because reactance is a strong motivational state, it has implications for reducing discrimination in the workplace. This may be especially true in selection, as decision makers are often guided by certain rules and regulations (e.g., eliminate adverse impact, reduce bias). Being guided by external forces can result in a perceived lack of control over the selection process, which may elicit reactance. This is problematic, as reactance is characterized by ''blind resistance,'' the result of which may lead people to ignore rules and regulations in order to make decisions that allow them to regain control over the situation. Therefore, we suggest that language be restructured in a way that allows employees and/or decision makers to retain a sense of control over the selection process (i.e., by framing suggestions regarding increased diversity as freedoms).

Inclusion. The SIP theory is especially relevant to inclusion practices targeted at both active (i.e., training) and passive diversity management. For example, SIP theory can help organizations identify how social cues maximize the positive effects of diversity training. Likewise, further research may uncover the extent and means by which factors such as trainer characteristics and trainee interactions affect training outcomes. In addition, social factors within organizations influence the behaviors of diversity champions, which may influence the extent to which their efforts are successful (Cunningham & Sartore, 2010). Thus, SIP theory may provide answers to questions regarding attitudes and behaviors associated with the presence of diversity champions within organizations.

SIP theory's relevance to job satisfaction implies that minority satisfaction, and other positive attitudes such as organizational commitment, stand to benefit from the relevant use of social information within the workplace. Therefore, organizations should ensure that stakeholders, including those who do not have direct responsibility for diversity management, are consistently sending messages that support diversity inclusion. Members of ally and affinity groups can support and reinforce this effort by providing training regarding positive communication strategies.

Retention. Given the high costs associated with employee turnover, it is important for organizations to retain qualified employees. One way to do this is to implement diversity management, which often includes diversity training. A limitation of diversity training is the potential for backlash. Thus, it is important for organizations to frame diversity training in ways that reduce reactance (Pendry et al., 2007). Rather than framing training as a corrective or preventative measure, leaders can connect diversity training to organizational goals and objectives. In addition, allowing employees to participate in training design may decrease reactance and encourage buy in. For instance, each attendee could be asked to

develop a short activity that illustrates a positive aspect of diversifying his or her work group, team, or department. Finally, from a dissonance perspective, emphasizing the voluntary nature of diversity training can lead to the perception that one is committed to diversity, thereby making discriminatory behaviors a cause for dissonance that will be avoided in the future.

The notion of social identity complexity would suggest that diversity training focus on employee similarities and differences. Doing so will help employees realize that social identities are often complex; ingroups are frequently composed of members who vary in age, gender, and race, among other characteristics. In other words, focusing on employee differences can help employees realize that their colleagues' social identities are multidimensional. This realization may prevent the activation of prejudice that is associated with particular characteristics.

Conclusion

In their focal article, Lindsey et al. suggest that knowledge from other domains can be used to develop strategies for reducing workplace discrimination. We agree, and we suggest that one such domain is social psychology. We believe that theories such as dissonance, reactance, SIP, and social identity can shed light on the issue of workplace discrimination by focusing on the social motives that are associated with situational factors in the workplace. By identifying the underlying motives and how they interact with the situation, we can use these theories to devise strategies that reduce the effects of discrimination on both individuals and organizations.

References

Adams, J. S. (1965). Inequity in social exchange. In L. Berkowitz (Ed.), *Advances in experimental social psychology* (Vol. 2, pp. 267–299). New York, NY: Academic Press.

Brehm, J. W. (1966). *A theory of psychological reactance*. New York, NY: Academic Press.

Brehm, S. S., & Brehm, J. W. (1981). *Psychological reactance: A theory of freedom and control*. New York, NY: Academic Press.

Cunningham, G. B., & Sartore, M. L. (2010). Championing diversity: The influence of personal and organizational antecedents. *Journal of Applied Social Psychology*, *40*(4), 788–810.

Deci, E. L., Connell, J. P., & Ryan, R. M. (1989). Self-determination in a work organization. *Journal of Applied Psychology*, *74*(4), 580–590.

Erdogan, B., Bauer, T. N., Peiro, J. M., & Truxillo, D. M. (2011). Overqualified employees: Making the best of a potentially bad situation for individuals and organizations. *Industrial and Organizational Psychology: Perspectives on Science and Practice*, *4*, 215–232.

Festinger, L. (1957). *A theory of cognitive dissonance*. Evanston, IL: Row, Peterson and Company.

Festinger, L., & Carlsmith, J. M. (1959). Cognitive consequences of forced compliance. *Journal of Abnormal and Social Psychology*, *58*, 203–210.

Forgas, J. P., & George, J. M. (2001). Affective influences on judgments and behavior in organizations: An information processing perspective. *Organizational Behavior and Human Decision Processes*, *86*(1), 3–34.

Kluger, A. N., & DeNisi, A. (1996). The effects of feedback interventions on performance: A historical review, a meta-analysis, and a preliminary feedback intervention theory. *Psychological Bulletin*, *119*(2), 254–284.

Lawrence, T. B., & Robinson, S. L. (2007). Ain't misbehavin: Workplace deviance as organizational resistance. *Journal of Management*, *33*(3), 378–394.

Lindsey, A., King, E., Dunleavy, E., McCausland, T., & Jones, K. (2013). What we know and don't: Eradicating employment discrimination 50 years after the Civil Rights Act. *Industrial and Organizational Psychology: Perspectives on Science and Practice*, *6*(4), 391–413.

Pendry, L. F., Driscoll, D. M., & Field, S. C. T. (2007). Diversity training: Putting theory into practice. *Journal of Occupational and Organizational Psychology*, *80*, 27–50.

Roccas, S., & Brewer, M. B. (2002). Social identity complexity. *Personality and Social Psychology Review*, *6*(2), 88–106.

Salancik, G. R., & Pfeffer, J. (1978). A social information processing approach to job attitudes and task design. *Administrative Science Quarterly*, *23*, 224–253.

Shih, M., Young, M. J., & Bucher, A. (2013). Working to reduce the effects of discrimination: Identity management strategies in organizations. *American Psychologist*, *68*(3), 145–157.

Turner, J. C., Brown, R. J., & Tajfel, H. (1979). Social comparison and group interest in ingroup favouritism. *European Journal of Social Psychology*, *9*, 187–204.

Wood, I., & Lawler, E. E., III (1970). Effects of piece-rate overpayment on productivity. *Journal of Applied Psychology*, *54*, 234–238.

Zalesny, M. D., & Ford, J. K. (1990). Extending the social information processing perspective: New links to attitudes, behaviors, and perceptions. *Organizational Behavior and Human Decision Processes*, *47*(2), 205–246.