Understanding Diversity: The Importance of Social Acceptance

Jacqueline M. Chen¹ and David L. Hamilton²

Abstract
Two studies investigated how people define and perceive diversity in the historically majority-group dominated contexts of business and academia. We hypothesized that individuals construe diversity as both the numeric representation of racial minorities and the social acceptance of racial minorities within a group. In Study 1, undergraduates’ (especially minorities’) perceptions of campus diversity were predicted by perceived social acceptance on a college campus, above and beyond perceived minority representation. Study 2 showed that increases in a company’s representation and social acceptance independently led to increases in perceived diversity of the company among Whites. Among non-Whites, representation and social acceptance only increased perceived diversity of the company when both qualities were high. Together these findings demonstrate the importance of both representation and social acceptance to the achievement of diversity in groups and that perceiver race influences the relative importance of these two components of diversity.

Keywords
diversity, social acceptance, belonging, intergroup relations, race

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In 2014, Harvard University matriculated a record number of underrepresented minorities, including African Americans and Latinos, in their freshman class (Fairbanks, 2014). Despite this historic milestone, students from minority backgrounds have expressed deep dissatisfaction with their college experience. For example, the “I, Too, Am Harvard” campaign on social media highlighted the negative experiences of Black undergraduates: “Our voices often go unheard on this campus, our experiences are devalued, our presence is questioned . . .” (“I, Too, Am Harvard,” 2014). What Fairbanks refers to as the “paradox of integration” reflects the fact that increased representation of racial minorities within historically White institutions does not sufficiently address their feelings of exclusion, nor does it fulfill institutional promises of diversity. The existence of this paradox suggests that achieving diversity within these institutions involves more than objective inclusion—it also necessitates the psychological inclusion of racial minorities. The present research investigated the importance of achieving both objective and subjective inclusion of racial minorities for achieving institutional diversity. We propose that both minority representation and a socially accepting institutional culture contribute to individuals’ perceptions of group diversity and that White and racial minority perceivers differ in the relative importance of these two factors for achieving diversity.

Understanding how people think about and judge the diversity of groups is both theoretically and practically important. Perceptions of group composition play a key role in outcomes such as the encoding and storing of information about groups, stereotyping, and in-group identification (e.g., perceived entitlement; see Hamilton, Chen, & Way, 2011, for a review). Likewise, perceptions of group diversity may influence how individuals process information about their groups and the extent to which they identify with those groups (Apfelbaum, Phillips, & Richeson, 2014). Furthermore, as the opening example suggests, understanding lay conceptions of diversity is essential for the successful integration of historically White institutions. Our research addresses this issue by investigating

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individuals’ conceptualizations of diversity within the historically White contexts of higher education and business to determine how people judge the diversity of groups within those contexts.

**Diversity as Representation**

Previous research has focused on how group diversity affects outcomes such as group productivity and cohesion (see Van Knippenberg & Schippers, 2007; Williams & O’Reilly, 1998). To this end, researchers have developed formulae for measuring the diversity of groups (e.g., Bezrukova, Jhn, Thatcher, & Zanuto, 2009; Jehn, Northcraft, & Neale, 1999; see Harrison & Klein, 2007), usually quantifying diversity as a function of the number of categories represented in the group and the number of group members within each of those categories. The formulae are consistent with the commonly used definition of diversity as the representation of minorities within a group or organization (“Diversity,” 2013). However, these objective indices of diversity do not directly correspond to group members’ subjective perceptions of group diversity (Homan, Greer, Jehn, & Koning, 2010; Van Knippenberg, van Ginkel, & Homan, 2013). As such, researchers have argued that increased attention should be given to understanding the mental processes underlying the perception of diversity (Moreland, 2013; Van Knippenberg & Schippers, 2007).

Indeed, recent work has demonstrated that terms referring to particular components of diversity, minorities and representation, are ambiguous and therefore that objective diversity indices are subject to perceivers’ motivated interpretation (Bauman, Trawalter, & Unzueta, 2014; Binning & Unzueta, 2013; Unzueta & Binning, 2010, 2012; Unzueta, Knowles, & Ho, 2012). Not surprisingly, race-based motivations contribute to divergence in diversity-related judgments. For example, Unzueta and Binning (2010) documented that White, Black, and Latino perceivers report associating diversity with Black and Latino people to a greater extent than with Asians, whereas Asian perceivers report associating Asian, Black, and Latino people with diversity to an equal extent. These findings are consistent with the idea that Asian perceivers are more motivated than others to view their in-group as equally relevant to diversity and therefore equally deserving of diversity resources (e.g., scholarships) as are other minorities. Furthermore, these findings suggested that Asians would perceive a group with high Asian representation as more diverse than would perceivers of other races, which was later demonstrated by Bauman et al. (2014).

Also extending this work, Unzueta and Binning (2012) showed that perceiver motives influence interpretations of representation. A common conceptualization of representation is numeric representation, or the proportion of the group that consists of minorities (see “Campus Ethnic Diversity,” 2013). Another type of representation is hierarchical representation, which refers to where in the group’s hierarchy the minorities are distributed and can be considered a measure of minorities’ access to power in the group (Cox, 1993; Krieger, 2007). Unzueta and Binning (2012) showed that perceivers interpreted representation to best serve their racial in-group. Specifically, highly identified Whites defined diversity more broadly, as either numeric or hierarchical representation, so that groups can more easily meet this criterion and the status quo is less likely to change. In contrast, minorities defined diversity more narrowly, as requiring both numeric and hierarchical representation. As a consequence, groups have difficulty meeting these criteria and need to institute social policies to become more diverse. Therefore, perceivers’ motives to flexibly define the representation of minorities can lead to race-based differences in the perception of that group’s diversity level.

**Diversity and Social Acceptance**

Whereas previous research has shown that perceivers can adjust which objective criteria to include or exclude in diversity judgments depending on their goals, we propose that subjective perceptions of the group’s diversity climate are an important component of perceiving diversity in general. Specifically, we propose that the concept of diversity conveys both the representation of minorities and the social acceptance of minorities within a group. Furthermore, we propose that there will be racial differences in the relative importance of representation and social acceptance components of diversity.

Whereas representation entails the objective inclusion of minorities within academic and business organizations, social acceptance encompasses the psychological inclusion of minorities as group members. Broadly, we conceptualize social acceptance as the presence of an egalitarian atmosphere within an organization, created by egalitarian beliefs and interactions among group members, perpetuated by group norms and practices, and felt by both majority and minority group members. It is important to note that, although a group may have high numeric representation of minorities, its policies or culture could lead racial minorities to feel alienated or undervalued. These types of situations may occur frequently in the real world, for instance, when institutions consistently underpay minority employees or when schools fail to incorporate the perspectives of minorities in their curriculum. Therefore, the social acceptance level of an organization may be related to but is conceptually distinct from numeric representation.

Thus, building on recent work documenting that perceivers can infer a group’s level of social acceptance from objective criteria (i.e., different levels and forms of minority representation; Bauman et al., 2014; Unzueta & Binning, 2010; Binning & Unzueta, 2013), we argue that perceived social acceptance predicts perceived group diversity above and beyond perceptions of the objective criteria, such that perceptions diversity are uniquely predicted by both representation and social
acceptance. As such, our theoretical approach diverges from past research by focusing on the specific meanings conveyed by diversity within historically White institutions rather than focusing on perceivers’ strategic interpretation of diversity guided by their motivations within specific contexts.

Throughout most of U.S. history, racial minorities have been stigmatized rather than socially accepted by society at large, and they have been explicitly excluded from opportunities in academics and business. Although the norms against having and expressing prejudice are currently strong in the United States (Gaertner & Dovidio, 1986; Plant & Devine, 1998), a lack of social acceptance of minorities persists and affects important outcomes in education and business. Academic environments frequently contain subtle cues that lead underrepresented minorities to question their belonging within those domains (Cheryan, Plaut, Davies, & Steele, 2009; Murphy, Steele, & Gross, 2007; Stephens, Townsend, Markus, & Phillips, 2012; Walton & Cohen, 2007; Walton & Spencer, 2009). In the workplace, minorities are often stigmatized by majority-group members and consequently experience social isolation in work groups and exclusion from informal interaction networks (Ibarra, 1995; Morrison & Von Glinow, 1990; O’Leary & Ickovics, 1992). Therefore, the acceptance of minorities has not been fully achieved within academic and business domains, and groups will vary in their degree of social acceptance of minorities. We therefore hypothesized that individuals would use the level of social acceptance of minorities within a group as one criterion for judging its diversity level, above and beyond their perception of minority representation within the group.

The Role of Perceiver Race

Extending this line of reasoning further, we propose that members of different racial groups differ in their weighing of representation and social acceptance in diversity judgments. This prediction is based on several considerations. First, there are race differences in the extent to which the group’s level of social acceptance fulfills perceivers’ psychological needs. Being socially accepted is a basic need for all individuals (Baumeister & Leary, 1995), whereas being socially accepting toward racial out-groups is a social value that White people internalize to varying degrees (Plant & Devine, 1998). Therefore, social acceptance of minorities within the group setting fulfills a more basic need for minorities than for Whites and, consequently, minorities may attend to and give more value to the level of social acceptance of a group (Mendoza-Denton, Downey, Purdie, Davis, & Pietrzak, 2002; Murphy et al., 2007; Purdie-Vaughns, Steele, Davies, Dirlmann, & Crosby, 2008; see also Huo, Binning, & Molina, 2010). Thus, we reasoned that minorities would weigh social acceptance more heavily in their perceptions of diversity than would Whites. Furthermore, because representation is important to minorities’ diversity judgments insofar as it conveys social acceptance (Bauman et al., 2014), minorities may weigh social acceptance more heavily than representation in their judgments of group diversity when they have access to both types of information (e.g., when they are members of the group as opposed to outside observers with limited contact).

Second, there may be race differences in the confidence with which perceivers judge representation versus social acceptance, and race differences in confidence could lead to race differences in the extent to which each cue is used in making diversity judgments. Specifically, representation can be readily observed and assessed by objective measures, whereas social acceptance is a subjective judgment about the group’s diversity climate. Based on their standing as majority-group members, White individuals are likely to have less confidence in their perceptions of how accepting the group is of minorities than in their perceptions of minority representation within the group. For them, social acceptance may seem difficult to discern because they have not been targets of or witnessed blatant racism, which is the prototypical lay definition of racial bias (Sommers & Norton, 2006) but occurs far less frequently than more subtle forms of bias (e.g., Swim, Hyers, Cohen, Fitzgerald, & Bylsma, 2003). They may also feel that their perceptions of social acceptance are not as legitimate as those of minorities (Plaut, Garnett, Buffardi, & Sanchez-Burks, 2011). Because people are more likely to base judgments on criteria about which they are confident (e.g., Petty, Brinol, & Tormala, 2002), White perceivers may rely more on representation than on social acceptance when making diversity judgments.

In sum, we hypothesized that both White and minority perceivers would use representation and social acceptance in their perceptions of group diversity, but in different ways. Specifically, we predicted that Whites’ perceptions of diversity would rely more strongly on perceived representation than on perceived social acceptance, whereas minorities would rely more strongly on perceived social acceptance than would Whites, and this factor might be even more important than representation to minorities’ judgments. We tested these hypotheses in a questionnaire study (Study 1) and an experiment (Study 2).

Study 1

Study 1 investigated the extent to which undergraduates use representation and social acceptance of minorities as bases for their judgments of their university’s diversity level. Using a questionnaire, we measured students’ perceptions of numeric representation of minorities and perceptions of social acceptance in the student body.

We reasoned that achieving social acceptance within an organization requires meeting two criteria, and we measured it according to this conceptualization. Specifically, a group that is high in social acceptance will contain (a) majority group members who are accepting of racial minorities, and (b) racial minorities who feel that their presence is accepted.
and valued. Groups could theoretically be high on only one of these criteria, in which case their level of social acceptance would not be optimal. For example, White group members could believe that they are egalitarian and non-prejudiced; whereas, minority group members feel that their concerns are trivialized or ignored. On the other hand, minority group members could feel comfortable and accepted within the group even though they perceive White group members as having racial biases (e.g., “They like me anyway” or “I’m not like those other minorities”). Consistent with our conceptualization of social acceptance, we measured perceived social acceptance using a composite of two scales assessing perceived Whites’ racial prejudice (reverse-scored) and perceived minority comfort on campus.

We hypothesized that perceived representation and perceived social acceptance would predict perceived diversity. More importantly, we predicted that perceived social acceptance would positively predict perceived diversity above and beyond perceived representation. As outlined earlier, our key interest was in how perceiver race would influence the relative importance of representation and social acceptance in perceptions of group diversity.

**Method**

**Participants.** We sought to recruit 200 White participants and 200 Latino participants. The final sample contained 446 undergraduates at the University of California, Santa Barbara (UCSB) who participated in the study (317 females; \( M_{\text{age}} = 19.65 \) years, \( SD = 2.2 \)) in exchange for partial course credit or monetary compensation. Of these, 197 were Latino and 249 were White.

**Materials.** The questionnaire was developed for the purposes of this research. We focused our investigation on perceptions of diversity in the student body because we reasoned that, for our participants, the student body is a core part of the university, and therefore perceptions of a university’s diversity level may strongly rest on the diversity of its student body. In addition, we were skeptical whether undergraduates would have knowledge about the level of social acceptance for minorities among the faculty, administration, and staff. If so, then the lack of an association between perceived social acceptance and perceived diversity would be subject to multiple interpretations (either that social acceptance was not an important aspect of diversity or that perceivers did not base their judgments on criteria about which they were uncertain).

Participants responded to three versions of each question because we asked about Black, Asian, and Latino target groups separately. For example, one numeric representation question, “Asians are a large minority group among students at UCSB,” was shown to participants two additional times to ask about “Latinos” and “Blacks.”

**Numeric representation** was measured with 12 items. These items assessed participants’ perceptions of the number of racial minorities present on the UCSB campus. Most items used a 7-point response scale from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree); for example, “At [this university], there are lots of Asian/Black/Latino students”). Three items had the format, “What proportion of the student body at [this university] is Asian/Black/Latino?” and participants wrote in their response. Consequently, the 12 numeric representation items were standardized and then averaged together (\( \alpha = .81 \)).

Our index of social acceptance on campus was created by averaging two composite measures of (a) the extent to which minorities felt included on campus (i.e., minority inclusion; 18 items; \( \alpha = .93 \)) and (b) the extent to which Whites did not have biases against minority group members (i.e., perceived lack of bias among Whites; 15 items; \( \alpha = .90 \)). Items assessing minority inclusion asked about their level of comfort (e.g., “Asian students feel comfortable and at home at UCSB”) and the extent to which minority students felt valued by the larger community (e.g., “Black students feel part of the larger UCSB community” and “Latino students feel supported by the campus climate at UCSB”). The questions measuring the perception of White students’ bias, adapted from the Modern Racism Scale (McConahay, 1986), assessed participants’ perception of how White students think and act toward minority students (e.g., “The White students at UCSB don’t pay attention to Asian students’ concerns” and “The White students at UCSB believe that Latino students are responsible for creating racial tension on campus”) and then were reverse-coded so that higher scores indicated less perceived racial bias among White students. There was a strong positive correlation between perceived minority inclusion and perceived lack of racial bias among Whites, \( r(444) = .73, p < .001 \). Results below report analyses using the social acceptance composite variable. However, we also report the analyses broken down by subscale and by target racial group (Asian, Black, and Latino) in the Online Supplemental Material, and these results were consistent with the results reported in the subsequent section.

Perceived diversity (\( \alpha = .96 \)) was measured with six items adapted from Unzueta and Binning (2012). We were careful not to define diversity within any of the items (e.g., “I would describe this university as having a diverse student body”), as the main objective of our research was to determine how strongly perceivers associated representation and social acceptance with diversity.

**Procedure.** Participants (run in groups from one to seven) were told that the purpose of the study was to assess their attitudes and beliefs about the university. The questionnaire was administered on the computer using Empirisoft’s Med- iLab software. Participants responded to items assessing perceived numeric representation, social acceptance, and diversity of the student body. The items assessing numeric representation and social acceptance were presented in random order with other items that were included for exploratory purposes. Then participants responded to questions...
about the university’s diversity level, adapted from Unzueta and Binning (2012), presented in random order. Finally, participants reported their demographic information and were debriefed and compensated.

Results

Race differences in perceived diversity and its components. We first investigated racial differences in mean levels of perceived numeric representation, social acceptance, and diversity on campus. Based on past research (Unzueta & Binning, 2012; Unzueta et al., 2012), we expected that Whites would perceive the university to be higher on all of these characteristics than would Latinos. A series of independent-sample t tests tested these predictions (see Table 1). As expected, Whites perceived the university to have higher numeric representation of minorities, more social acceptance, and more diversity than did Latinos, all ps < .01.

Predicting diversity judgments. We predicted that both numeric representation and social acceptance would predict perceivers’ judgments of the university’s diversity. To test this hypothesis, we first calculated zero-order correlations between the two predictor variables and perceived diversity of the university. Consistent with our predictions, perceived diversity was significantly positively associated with both perceived representation, r(444) = .52, p < .001, and perceived social acceptance, r(444) = .34, p < .001.

Between-race analyses. We hypothesized that there would be race differences in the use of representation and social acceptance in participants’ diversity judgments. Specifically, we predicted that Whites would use numeric representation more strongly than would Latinos, and that Latinos would use social acceptance more strongly than would Whites. We tested these hypotheses using hierarchical regression predicting participants’ perceptions of diversity (see Table 2). In Step 1, we entered the three variables of interest: mean-centered perceived numeric representation, mean-centered perceived social acceptance, and dummy-coded participant race (coded as White = 0, Latino = 1), R² = .40, p < .001. Representation, b = 1.14 (95% confidence interval [CI] = [0.92, 1.36]), β = .41, p < .001, and social acceptance, b = 0.77 (95% CI = [0.62, 0.93]), β = .39, p < .001, positively predicted perceived diversity. Participant race positively predicted perceived diversity, b = 0.27, (95% CI = [0.02, 0.53]), β = .09, p = .03, indicating that Latinos perceived UCSB to be more diverse when controlling for race differences in perceived representation and perceived social acceptance.

In Step 2, we entered all two-way interaction terms: representation by participant race, social acceptance by participant race, and representation by social acceptance, ΔR² = .02, p < .001. There was a significant representation by race interaction predicting perceived diversity, b = −.70, (95% CI = [−1.14, −0.25]), β = −.17, p = .002. Investigation of the simple slopes (Aiken & West, 1991) supported our hypothesis that perceived representation was more strongly predictive of perceived diversity among Whites, b = 1.44, (95% CI = [1.15, 1.73]), β = .51, p < .001, than among Latinos, b = 0.74 (95% CI = [0.41, 1.07]), β = .26, p < .001. There was also a significant social acceptance by participant race interaction, b = 0.36, (95% CI = [0.03, 0.68]), β = .13, p = .03. Consistent with our predictions, Latinos, b = 0.97, (95% CI = [0.74, 1.21]), β = .49, p < .001, used social acceptance more in their perceptions of diversity than did Whites, b = 0.62 (95% CI = [0.39, 0.84]), β = .31, p < .001. There was no representation by social acceptance interaction, p = .29.

Within-race analyses predicting diversity judgments. To determine the relative importance of the representation and social acceptance cues for Latinos and Whites, we next conducted multivariate regression analyses separately for each racial group.

Latinos. We regressed Latinos’ perceptions of diversity on their perceived numeric representation and perceived social acceptance. The strongest predictor of Latinos’ perceptions of diversity was perceived social acceptance, b = 1.00, (95% CI = [0.79, 1.22]), β = .51, p < .001, and then perceived representation, b = 0.76, (95% CI = [0.43, 1.08]), β = .26, p < .001. The interaction term was not significant, p = .35.

Whites. The same analysis strategy was conducted on White participants’ perceptions of campus diversity. Numeric representation was the stronger cue to diversity, b = 1.41, (95% CI = [1.12, 1.70]), β = .49, p < .001, though perceived

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<th>Table 1. Mean Differences Between Latinos and Whites on Perceptions of Diversity and Its Components in Study 1.</th>
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Note. Standard deviations are displayed in parentheses. Numeric representation scores differ from the others because these items were standardized before being averaged together.

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<th>Table 2. Race Differences in the Role of Numeric Representation and Social Acceptance in Predicting Perceived Diversity in Study 1.</th>
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Note. Standardized beta weights and p value for the race by diversity component interaction are presented. "p < .001."
social acceptance also significantly predicted perceived diversity, \( b = 0.60, (95\% CI = [0.37, 0.82]), \beta = .27, p < .001 \). The interaction term was not significant, \( p = .59 \).

Taken together, the results of these analyses reflect the hypothesized differential use of representation and social acceptance by Latinos and Whites.

**Discussion**

The results of Study 1 provided initial support for our hypotheses. As expected, perceived representation and perceived social acceptance were positively correlated with perceivers’ judgments of the university’s diversity level. In addition, the extent to which the university was perceived as socially accepting of minorities predicted perceptions of campus diversity above and beyond perceptions of numeric representation, supporting our assertion that social acceptance is an important aspect of diversity that is conceptually distinct from representation.

The results of Study 1 supported our predictions regarding the role of perceiver race. White students’ perceptions of diversity were based more heavily on numeric representation than were Latinos’ perceptions of diversity, whereas Latino students’ perceptions of diversity were more strongly influenced by perceived social acceptance. In real-world contexts, these racial differences in the relative emphasis on representation versus social acceptance components of diversity could become sources of intergroup discord; that is, minorities and Whites might disagree about whether or not their group is diverse because their perceptions of diversity have partially different bases.

The goal of Study 1 was to demonstrate that social acceptance is an important aspect of what it means for a group to be diverse above and beyond minority representation. Indeed, both minority and, to a lesser extent, White perceivers generally associated diversity with an inclusive group environment. Study 2 built upon these findings to determine how perceivers relied on these components when judging the diversity of a novel group.

**Study 2**

Study 2 manipulated social acceptance and representation cues orthogonally to determine whether they lead to increases in the perceived diversity of a group. To increase generalizability of our findings, Study 2 examined perceptions of diversity of a company. We presented participants with a fact sheet containing the level of representation (proportion of minorities within the workforce) and social acceptance (proportion of employees feeling included presented separately for each race group) of a company and asked them to rate the company’s diversity. Consistent with Study 1, we hypothesized that increases in both variables would cause increases in perceivers’ judgments of the company’s diversity.

It is reasonable to expect that increases in social acceptance would only influence perceptions of diversity when some moderate level of minority representation has been achieved. For instance, a small choral group composed of White males would probably not be considered diverse regardless of the singers’ lack of racial bias or how comfortable a hypothetical minority member would feel as a member of the group. Therefore, we hypothesized that representation and social acceptance cues would have an interactive effect on perceptions of diversity, such that the social acceptance cue would only affect perceived diversity when representation is above a certain threshold.

We had competing hypotheses regarding how perceiver race would moderate our results. Study 1 supported our argument that both Whites and racial minorities conceptualize diversity in terms of both representation and social acceptance, with varying emphasis on the former or latter component. The racial differences in relative weighting of the components in diversity judgments could result from multiple sources. It is possible that there are racial differences in perceivers’ confidence in their perceptions of representation (objective) versus social acceptance (subjective). If so, then we should observe minimal racial differences in this study, which gives participants the representation and social acceptance information in fairly objective ways.

It is also possible that Study 1 findings reflected differences in the relative importance of the two aspects of diversity to Whites and racial minorities. Based on this view, Whites and racial minorities should agree in their perceptions of company diversity when the company is low in both representation and social acceptance or high in both. However, when one of these variables and the other is low, the race groups should diverge in their judgments of diversity. When the company is high in representation but low in social acceptance, Whites should perceive the company as higher in diversity compared with minorities. When the company is low in representation but high in social acceptance, racial minorities may perceive the company as higher in diversity compared with Whites.

Yet another set of predictions was derived from previous research showing that race-based motivations influence perceivers’ conceptualizations of diversity (Unzueta et al., 2012). From this perspective, both components could be used flexibly to serve racial group interests rather than regarded as contributing factors to diversity in their own rights. In line with this reasoning, we would expect that, in the absence of minority representation, White perceivers would broaden their grounds for perceiving diversity to include mere social acceptance (i.e., high social acceptance but low numeric representation) to be able to see the organization as diverse. According to this view, White perceivers would consider either representation or social acceptance as sufficient for perceiving a group to be diverse, whereas racial minorities would adopt stricter criteria for diversity such that only a company high in representation and social acceptance would be considered diverse. Study 2 investigated these competing hypotheses.
**Method**

**Participants.** We sought to recruit 50 participants (25 White, 25 non-White) for each of the four between-subjects conditions (see “Design” section). Participants were recruited from Amazon.com’s Mechanical Turk. As recommended by Mason and Suri (2012), we administered two attention checks and only analyzed the responses of participants who passed both of them.2 The resulting final sample represented 65.2% of the workers recruited to the study for a total of 214 individuals (93 females, 119 males, 2 declined to state). The final sample contained 54 Asian, 26 Black, 101 White, 8 Latino, 10 Middle Eastern, 7 Mixed/Multiracial, 4 Native American, and 2 Other-identified individuals (M_age = 31.32 years, SD = 16.15). Seventy-nine percent of the sample was born in the United States and, on average, participants had lived in the United States for 29.78 years (SD = 11.64).

**Materials.** Representation and social acceptance cues were manipulated within a company fact sheet. The fact sheet presented information about the company’s workforce separated into the following racial groups: Asians, Blacks, Hispanics, non-Hispanic Whites, and Others. Racial composition of the employee demographics was displayed in a pie chart. In the low representation condition, participants learned that the company’s workforce was 5% Asian, 5% Black, 5% Hispanic, 3% Other, and 82% White. In the high representation condition, participants learned that the workforce was 12% Asian, 12% Black, 12% Hispanic, 3% Other, and 61% White.

The social acceptance cue was displayed in bar chart form. Social acceptance was manipulated by discrepancies in White and non-White employees’ responses to the question, “Overall, do you feel included as part of the Strathmore, Inc. team?” In the low social acceptance condition, participants learned that non-White employees were much less likely to respond “yes” to the question, with fewer than 20% responding in the affirmative, compared with White employees, with more than 80% answering “yes” to the question. In the high social acceptance condition, participants learned that White and non-White employees were equally and highly likely to respond “yes” to the question, in which all groups had higher than 80% of employees agreeing to the statement.

Perceived diversity was assessed with five items adapted from Study 1 (e.g., “Strathmore, Inc. has a high level of diversity”; α = .96). Participants indicated the extent to which they agreed or disagreed with each statement using a 7-point Likert scale from strongly disagree to strongly agree with a neutral midpoint. Although participants did not view numeric values corresponding to the scale, their responses were coded from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree).

After the dependent measure, we included manipulation check questions to ensure that participants understood and paid attention to the figures presented. To check our representation manipulation, we asked participants, “How many of Strathmore, Inc.’s employees were (Asian/Black/Hispanic)?” with a 5-point Likert scale with the following response options: none of them (1), a few of them (2), some of them (3), many of them (4), and almost all of them (5). Participants did not view numeric values assigned to the scale, but their responses were coded from 1 to 5 as indicated. Participants’ responses to the questions for Asians, Blacks, and Hispanics were averaged together (α = .83). The social acceptance manipulation check items asked participants, “How included did the (Asian/Black/Hispanic/Other) employees feel?” with five response options from not at all to extremely. We averaged participants’ memory for the inclusion of the three minority groups (α = .91).

**Design.** The experiment had a 2 (Representation: low or high) × 2 (Social Acceptance: low or high) × 2 (Participant Race: White or non-White) between-subjects design. The dependent variable was the perceived diversity of the company. To examine the effect of participant race, we separated the sample into White and non-White participants on the basis of their responses to the demographic questionnaire. To be consistent with their self-reported identification, Multiracial participants were classified as non-White (see Townsend, Fryberg, Wilkins, & Markus, 2012). We excluded two participants who did not report their race.3

**Procedure.** The experiment was conducted online using Qualtrics (www.qualtrics.com). Participants were told that the U.S. Department of Labor was conducting a diversity-related audit of all U.S. companies with more than 1,000 employees and had compiled fact sheets on all qualifying companies. Participants were told that they would be evaluating one of these fact sheets and rating the company, Strathmore, Inc., on its diversity level. Participants were then randomly assigned to read one of the four fact sheets. After reading the fact sheet, participants made their diversity judgment on the same webpage as the fact sheet so that they could refer back to the information during that time. After submitting their responses, participants were asked to recall the representation and social acceptance information from the fact sheet (i.e., the manipulation checks). Finally, participants reported their demographic information and were debriefed and compensated.

**Results**

**Manipulation checks.** Participants in the low representation conditions recalled that there were fewer minority employees (M = 2.22, SE = .04) than participants in the high representation conditions (M = 2.66, SE = .05), t(211) = −6.87, p < .001, d = −0.95 (95% CI = [−1.23, −0.67]). Participants in the low social acceptance conditions remembered that the White employees (M = 3.47, SE = .08) felt significantly more included than did minority employees (M = 2.75, SE = .09), t(211) = −6.22, p < .001, d = −0.86 (95% CI = [−1.14, −0.58]). Therefore, the social acceptance manipulation was
successful. Neither manipulation check was moderated by participant race.

The effect of representation and social acceptance on perceived diversity. We hypothesized that representation and social acceptance would interact to predict perceived diversity. In addition, we had competing predictions about how participant race would moderate the way in which representation and social acceptance information was used in the diversity judgments. To test our predictions, we conducted a 2 (Representation: low or high) × 2 (Social Acceptance: low or high) × 2 (Participant Race: White or non-White) between-subjects ANOVA. There was a main effect of representation, \(F(1, 204) = 34.01, p < .001, \eta^2 = .14, (95\% \text{ CI} = [0.07, 0.23])\), indicating that participants rated the company as more diverse when representation was high (\(M = 4.81, SE = .13\)) compared with when it was low (\(M = 3.67, SE = .14\)). There was also a main effect of social acceptance, \(F(1, 204) = 7.51, p = .01, \eta^2 = .04, (95\% \text{ CI} = [0.003, 0.10])\). Participants rated the company as more diverse when social acceptance was high (\(M = 4.51, SE = .14\)) than when it was low (\(M = 3.97, SE = .14\)).

The main effects were qualified by a marginal interaction between representation and social acceptance, \(F(1, 204) = 3.38, p = .07, \eta_p^2 = .02, (95\% \text{ CI} = [0.00, 0.07])\). Consistent with our prediction, the social acceptance level of the company did not influence its perceived diversity when representation is low, \(p = .54\). Yet participants rated the company as more diverse when it was high in representation and social acceptance (\(M = 5.23, SE = .19\)) compared with when it was high in representation but low in social acceptance (\(M = 4.36, SE = .19\), \(p < .001\)).

The representation by social acceptance interaction was further qualified by a significant three-way interaction between representation, social acceptance, and participant race, \(F(1, 204) = 4.92, p = .03, \eta^2 = .02, (95\% \text{ CI} = [0.00, 0.08])\). To understand the three-way interaction, we conducted a series of planned comparisons separately by participant race (see Figures 1A and 1B).

White participants judged the company as more diverse in the high representation/high social acceptance condition (\(M = 5.22, SE = .26\)) compared with all other conditions, all \(ps < .05\). In addition, White participants judged the company to be lower in diversity when representation and social acceptance were low (\(M = 3.00, SE = .29\)) compared with the other three conditions, all \(ps < .05\). There was no difference in their judgments of the company’s diversity in the low representation/high social acceptance condition (\(M = 3.91, SE = .29\)) compared with the high representation/low social acceptance condition (\(M = 4.46, SE = .28\), \(p = .18\)). This pattern of results shows that Whites’ diversity judgments reflected an additive model of diversity (Representation + Social acceptance), viewing diversity as the sum of social acceptance and representation and increasing their perceptions of company diversity in response to increases in either factor.

Non-White participants rated the company as significantly more diverse when it was high in representation and social acceptance (\(M = 5.29, SE = .26\)) compared with the three other conditions, all \(ps < .01\). These participants rated the company equally diverse in low representation/low social acceptance (\(M = 4.16, SE = .28\)), low representation/high social acceptance (\(M = 3.60, SE = .30\)), and high representation/low social acceptance conditions (\(M = 4.27, SE = .26\)), all \(ps > .09\). (The \(p\) value of .09 corresponded to the low representation/high social acceptance versus high representation/low social acceptance comparison.) This pattern of results reflected a multiplicative model of diversity (Representation × Social acceptance) among non-White participants such that they viewed both social acceptance and representation as necessary components of diversity and only increased their perceptions of diversity when the company had high levels of both components.

Finally, we compared Whites’ and racial minorities’ ratings of company diversity within each of the four experimental conditions. The only significant difference occurred when both representation and social acceptance were low; in this condition, White participants (\(M = 3.00, SE = .30\)) rated the company as significantly less diverse than non-White participants did (\(M = 4.16, SE = .27\), \(p = .004\)).
Discussion

Building on Study 1, Study 2 provided several insights in how perceivers use representation and social acceptance information in their diversity judgments of a group. First, consistent with our prediction, social acceptance influenced diversity judgments only when representation was high, suggesting that representation is necessary but not sufficient for achieving diversity. Second, although White and non-White participants generally agreed on the level of diversity that Strathmore, Inc. had, the within-race analyses revealed that Whites’ and non-Whites’ diversity judgments reflected important differences in how they construed diversity.

Whereas past work has demonstrated that Whites interpret the representation of minorities broadly so as to preserve the status quo that benefits their group (Unzueta & Binning, 2012; Unzueta et al., 2012), Study 2 showed that Whites consider social acceptance to be an important, independent aspect of diversity. Specifically, White perceivers’ diversity judgments reflected an additive model of diversity (Representation + Social acceptance) such that they rated the company as most diverse when it was high in both representation and social acceptance, less so when it was high in only one of the two components, and least diverse when it was low in both. Importantly, Whites did not construe diversity so flexibly that they claimed that a company low in representation but high in social acceptance was as diverse as a company high in both representation and social acceptance. Thus, our results indicate that White perceivers believe that representation and social acceptance are independent contributors to a group’s diversity.

In contrast, non-Whites’ diversity judgments reflected a stricter, multiplicative definition of diversity (Representation × Social acceptance) such that their perceptions of diversity only increased when the group was high in both representation and social acceptance. Importantly, non-Whites saw no difference in the diversity level of the companies that were low on representation, on social acceptance, or on both, suggesting that they required high representation and high social acceptance to consider a company to be diverse. These findings provide further evidence that social acceptance is more essential to minorities’ definitions of diversity compared with Whites’ definitions of diversity.

The only between-race difference in perceptions of Strathmore, Inc.’s diversity level occurred in the low representation, low social acceptance condition. The lack of between-race differences in diversity judgments in three of the four experimental conditions suggests that one reason for Whites’ and minorities’ different bases of diversity judgments is due to differences in certainty. In most situations, including the context of Study 1, minorities can be more confident than White perceivers in their assessments of a group’s level of social acceptance. Accordingly, in many situations, White perceivers are less likely to use social acceptance information in their diversity judgments. Study 2 suggests that, when White perceivers learn clear information about a company’s social acceptance level, they weigh this information as much as information about representation.

Surprisingly, the between-race difference observed in Study 2 was that Whites rated the company as less diverse than did non-Whites in this condition. We can only speculate about why this occurred. It is possible that Whites and non-Whites have different expectations for normative diversity levels in corporate America. Given that minorities more closely monitor environments for cues to social acceptance (Emerson & Murphy, 2014; Murphy et al., 2007; Purdie-Vaughns et al., 2008), they may be more accustomed to real world business contexts in which there is low representation and low social acceptance. As such, they may have perceived the low representation, low social acceptance company to be well within business norms and consequently they may not have perceived the company as especially lacking in diversity. In contrast, White participants may have been more surprised by the combination of low representation and low social acceptance levels of the company and consequently lowered their diversity rating. Whites’ responses could have also been due to specific motivations, such as impression management, guilt, or the motivation to appear non-prejudiced, when they learned that the White employees at the company felt more included than minorities did and rated the company as particularly low in diversity to assuage these concerns. Additional research is needed to investigate the interesting possibility that minorities and Whites have different expectations or beliefs about the normative level of diversity in business settings. For example, researchers could ask minorities and Whites to estimate the average levels of representation and social acceptance across companies nationwide and determine whether there are different expectations of the normative diversity level in businesses by perceiver race.

Another possible interpretation is that White and non-White participants were differentially focused on the amount of representation in the company. Specifically, it could be that White participants focused on the fact that there was only 5% of each minority group (Asian, Black, and Latino plus 3% Other) represented in the company, whereas non-White participants may have focused on the fact that overall the workforce was 18% non-White. Although this interpretation is inconsistent with past research documenting that racial minorities are more likely than Whites to focus on specific racial minority subgroups (e.g., Binning & Unzueta, 2013; Unzueta & Binning, 2012), it would clarify why Whites rated the low representation/low social acceptance company as less diverse than did non-Whites. A follow-up experiment could test this possibility by manipulating whether representation of minorities is presented altogether (e.g., total percentage of non-Whites in the workforce) or broken down by racial subgroup (as in the current study).
General Discussion

Many organizations profess their commitment to diversity, and the U.S. government invests millions of dollars in programs dedicated to increasing diversity in these contexts. Diversity seems to be highly valued and sought after, yet there is limited scientific understanding of how people judge the diversity of groups and what characteristics they deem to be important for achieving diversity. The present work sought to address these issues. Together, Studies 1 and 2 showed that perceivers conceptualize diversity in terms of both representation and social acceptance. Whereas previous research has documented the importance of feeling socially accepted for minorities’ psychological well-being and performance in these domains (e.g., Walton & Cohen, 2011), our work provides a novel demonstration that a group’s level of social acceptance is considered by perceivers to be an important factor in evaluating and achieving diversity.

This research extends the growing body of work on perceptions of diversity. To date, most of that work has focused on how different types of objective criteria can be included or excluded from diversity judgments to serve race-based goals within a specific group context. Rather than focusing on how perceiver motives affect objective indices of diversity within a given context, our approach was to determine whether lay conceptualizations of diversity generally include the subjective perception of social acceptance within a group and how the two components of diversity influenced diversity judgments of a novel group. Indeed, we found that this subjective aspect of diversity can lead perceivers to judge two groups with the same minority representation as having different levels of diversity. An interesting avenue for future research would be to examine how race-based motives influence the relative weight of representation versus social acceptance in diversity judgments by varying aspects of the context for these judgments (e.g., whether they have implications for new affirmative action policies in the company).

A key contribution of this research was to document racial differences in the conceptualization of diversity. Whites construed diversity as the sum of a group’s numeric representation and social acceptance levels, whereas non-Whites construed diversity as the product of numeric representation and social acceptance, such that only companies high in both components were rated as more diverse than a company low in both components. Additional research is necessary to document the underlying mechanisms for these racial differences. As reviewed in the Introduction, the observed racial differences may reflect differences in the relative importance of social acceptance for minorities (a basic psychological need) and Whites (a sociopolitical motivation) and/or differences in perceivers’ relative certainty in these components (as suggested by Study 2). These processes are not exhaustive nor are they mutually exclusive, and additional research is needed to further our understanding of why perceivers had different diversity construals. Several studies would be useful in addressing these issues.

First, a series of studies could provide converging evidence for racial differences in the relative importance in the use of representation and social acceptance in diversity judgments. On average, the social acceptance of minorities is more important to minorities than to Whites. However, social acceptance information should be particularly well attended to and used by White perceivers who are strongly internally motivated to control prejudice (Plant & Devine, 1998), and it should be less well attended to and used by minority perceivers with low need to belong (Leary, Kelly, Cottrell, & Schreindorfer, 2013) or strong individualistic values (Townsend, Major, Sawyer, & Mendes, 2010). Researchers could also use experimental manipulations to determine under what conditions racial differences in diversity construals are exacerbated or attenuated. It is possible that consideration of cues above and beyond representation requires more effort and/or motivation. Studies could determine whether racial differences in diversity construals increase under impoverished conditions such as time pressure and cognitive load. These constraints might increase Whites’ reliance on representation, as a heuristic for a group’s diversity level, but might not affect minorities’ use of both cues in diversity judgments. Additional studies could lower perceivers’ motivations in making diversity judgments by manipulating the relevance of the company (e.g., in another country such as Canada; see Krosch, Berntsen, Amodio, Jost, & Van Bavel, 2013). Race differences could be weaker when diversity judgments are less relevant to perceivers’ social environments.

Second, researchers could measure and manipulate perceivers’ certainty in their perceptions of representation and social acceptance to examine whether racial differences in the bases of diversity judgments are explained by differences in certainty. An experiment could determine whether racial differences decrease when all perceivers are made to feel less certain of these cues relative to a control condition. Thus, the current investigation provides a foundation for ample directions in future research.

It is also important to note that our investigation has been limited to a focus on how representation and social acceptance of racial minorities affect perceptions of diversity. There are, of course, many types of diversity. To what extent does the representation of different social categories, such as sexuality, nationality, and religion, are perceived to contribute to the diversity of a group? Are visible stigmas, such as gender and race, perceived to “count” more toward diversity than invisible stigmas such as sexuality? Another important question concerns the role of perceived social acceptance in diversity judgments of members of minority groups who are likely to remain in the numeric minority indefinitely (e.g., lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender [LGBT] individuals). The answers to these and other questions await further research.
Practical Implications

Perceptions of group diversity (or lack thereof) are an important precursor to the institution and cessation of hiring incentives, affirmative action policies, and diversity training. For instance, business executives may eliminate diversity initiatives after their goal to increase diversity via minority representation has been fulfilled. Simultaneously, the minority employees may feel that the company lacks diversity because they do not feel fully accepted in the workplace. The potential differences in how people conceptualize diversity could lead to costly problems with low employee satisfaction and retention (e.g., Tapia & Kvasny, 2004).

In addition, our results highlight a potential source of interracial tension. For example, the “I, Too, Am Harvard” campaign sought to highlight the marginalized experiences of Black students at Harvard (and other elite universities) to increase feelings of social acceptance within these contexts. However, individuals with a conceptualization of diversity that is limited to numeric representation could interpret the campaign as calling for increased representation of minorities on campus, and express frustration that, despite historic gains in their groups’ representation, minorities never seem to be satisfied with the status quo. Ironically, this lack of understanding between racial groups could perpetuate a lack of social acceptance, in turn lowering the perceived diversity of the group as a whole.

The present research has demonstrated that it is not enough for organizations to recruit minorities into their groups for them to be perceived as diverse. To be seen as diverse, groups also need to foster a culture of social acceptance or inclusion. Furthermore, we have shown that White perceivers think about diversity primarily in terms of numeric representation and secondarily in terms of social acceptance, whereas racial minority perceivers define diversity primarily in terms of social acceptance and secondarily in terms of representation. Importantly, White perceivers believe that both qualities are important, independent contributors to achieving diversity, whereas racial minority perceivers believe that both qualities are necessary to achieving diversity within a group.

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Notes

1. Additional survey items were included for pilot testing purposes and are contained in the Methodology File.
2. The first attention check asked participants to select “Disagree” on the 7-point response scale for that item. The second attention check asked participants to specify the day of the week. Their responses were compared to the date that they accessed the survey, recorded by Qualtrics, and coded for accuracy.
3. We do not wish for our analytic strategy to imply that we view racial minorities as a monolithic, homogeneous group. We believe that there will be important differences in the diversity-related experiences of Asian, Black, Latino, and other racial minority groups. However, the methodology of the study was such that the fact sheet made salient a racial distinction between Whites and non-Whites, and therefore we reasoned that the context of the experiment warranted an analytic approach that grouped racial minorities together.

Supplemental Material

The online supplemental material is available at http://pspb.sagepub.com SUPPLEMENTAL.

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