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Successive Study of Diversity Conference Evaluations of Presenters by Race, Gender, Sexual Orientation, and Disability

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Abstract

A Midwestern university's annual diversity conference hosts about 1,500 attendees from a campus of 9,000 students. Using a successive independent samples design, a series of cross-sectional surveys were conducted to answer the research question, how does a presenter's race, gender, and ability/disability affect participant responses on conference evaluations. A review of the literature has determined that our research represents the largest and longest empirical study of a higher education diversity conference in the United States. The research is a comparative study of evaluation trends of conference attendees toward diversity conference presenters based on race, gender, and disability over eight years from 2006 to 2013. Ten evaluation items provided qualitative and quantitative data on topics of quality, likes best, shortcomings, meets expectations, and level of appropriateness. Over 4000 evaluations were analyzed over an 8-year period, resulting in a 33% evaluation response rate. Content analysis of evaluation data revealed underlying themes in attendees' general comments. Threats to validity are discussed. Statistical analyzes include descriptive statistics, Chi-square, and regression analyses of contrasting trends in conference attendees' evaluations. A trends analysis of diversity conference evaluations articulates the reality that in modern societies, humans may occupy a number of social groups in the same social/political public space, but the perceived diversity of individuals and social groups result in differences in evaluations of quality and performance.

Keywords: Diversity, Evaluation, Bias

Introduction

Diversity conferences are used around the world to celebrate diversity as a community quality rather than an individual feature. Universities in particular promote diversity as mutual learning opportunities to engage the university community and students in an effort to celebrate diversity. The assumption is that engaging in exposure to celebration of diversity is a positive, growthful experience resulting in favorable outcomes for learning associated with democratic ideals and values¹. Some universities have used diversity conferences as a way to integrate diversity into academic culture and curriculum. Whether diversity conferences make a difference in student learning remains an unanswered question. How does a diversity conference presenter's race, gender, sexual orientation, and ability/disability affect participant responses on conference evaluations?

According to the ambiguity theory, people will express only one of multiple interpretations of a situation (e.g., a presentation), and then seek to validate their judgments. Ambiguity occurs when people's expectations do not match a situation (e.g., the quality of the presentation). They are not sure how much praise or credit that they should give the presenter, so they find some middle ground to express their judgment².

A second theory of importance to our research is Response Amplification Theory, which posits that when things go well for people of a minority status, the audience praise tends to be amplified³. For example, when the success of the minority presenter exceeds the expectations of the perceiver, the perceiver would evaluate the presentation more favorably than an equivalent presentation given by a non-minority presenter. Controversially, when things do not go well for people of a minority status, the audience's criticism would be amplified because they expected the presenter to do poorly, therefore perpetuating the audience's expectation. The audience perceives the people of minority status as perpetuating the stereotypes.

For the purposes of our research, minority is defined as anyone who is underrepresented in mainstream culture terms of race, class, abilities, gender, or areas around which the university hosts the diversity conference. Diversity is defined as the inclusion of different types of people (as people of different races or cultures) in a group or organization (e.g., a conference).

New research is necessary for this topic on diversity because we have failed to ask if these conferences are still working. Conference organizers who posit that something is better than nothing may have disregarded the fact that sometimes putting too much pressure on diversity may in fact amplify feelings of separation as opposed to unity. A *diversity education dilemma* occurs when exposure to information concerning status hierarchies related to socially salient identity groups reinforces those hierarchies in the classroom (e.g., based on race/ethnicity, gender, or physical disability)⁴. Consequently, "real world" status hierarchies strengthen and have negative consequences for student learning.

Diversity conferences worldwide have been used as a way to establish and encourage diversity on college campuses and in communities. Are these conferences encouraging diversity and diversity education or are the conferences creating racial biases?

Many universities have begun to see diversity as one of the leading topics with which they must concern their students. A study found that in 63 out of 99 higher education campuses cited term "diversity" more than the words such as "freedom", "liberty", "democracy", or "equality"⁵. Though these universities are encouraging diversity, a question remains as to whether the push for diversity actually helps students.

While seeking to increase diversity awareness, researchers are aware that people react differently to men and women succeeding or failing at tasks. When women succeed on "masculine" tasks, people attribute the females as having good luck or trying very hard, whereas when men succeed, people attribute males as having the *ability* to do the task. When men fail at these tasks, people attribute the males as not trying hard enough, or as a cause of bad luck⁶. Men who have negative attitudes towards gay men appear to have less negative attitudes towards lesbian women and view women's violations of sex roles as less serious or more "normal"⁷.

Consistent with most empirical research, the null hypothesis of our study is that no differences should exist for gender, race, disability, and sexual orientation in how attendees at a diversity conference perceive the presenters. Using Ambiguity Theory and Response Amplification Theory, we examined audience evaluations for ambiguous comments and amplification of audience praise or criticism for the presenters' presentation style.

The diversity conference from which we drew our case study research takes place annually on a Midwestern university campus of about 9,000 students. The conference topics are diverse (e.g., art, diversity, film, food, music, research, service), as well as the presenters themselves. Students, faculty, staff, and community members are invited to attend sessions of their choice free of charge. Students can present at the diversity conference or attend the conference when personally interested and when their professors are involved in conference presentations, offer

extra credit, assign sessions for students to attend, etc. Conference attendees fill out voluntary evaluations for each talk or activity that they attended.

Evaluations of individual sessions occurred after a typical 40- to 60-minute session. Self-selection effects of persons who were willing to complete voluntary evaluations were a threat to the internal validity of our study. The three remaining threats to internal validity for case study research projects include history, maturation, and mortality, which were not issues to the voluntary, short-term conference sessions of the current research.

Methods

This case study research had 1,875 diversity conference evaluations available during the years of 2009, 2010, 2012, 2013. Data during the conference years of 2009, 2010, 2012, and 2013 were unavailable for this study. The comment sections of the evaluations provided the data for the qualitative analysis. Data were coded as generally good, generally bad, or ambiguous. Coding for ambiguous comments was necessary to obtain data for the ambiguity theory of whether people gave ambiguous ratings to presenters of a minority status.

All conference evaluation data were entered onto Excel spreadsheets.

When coding quantitative data, we differentiated between white and non-white presenters. Non-white is defined as anyone who appears to be something other than Anglo-Saxon, including Native Americans, African Americans, Asians, and others. We coded gender as male or female. We only coded for sexual orientation when the presenter identified herself/himself in the presentation as Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender or Queer (LGBTQ). For disability, we coded whether the presenter had a visible disability, e.g., a stutter, a limp, or a breathing machine. We used SPSS to check for inter-rater reliability.

Results

We analyzed the comment sections of the evaluations to see how many people commented on the content vs. the presentation style or entertainment of the presentation to check the response amplification theory.

Not all conference evaluations included qualitative data. We analyzed 262 qualitative responses, resulting in a qualitative response rate of 14.0% of the 1,875 evaluations. As a test of for ambiguity theory or response amplification theory, the qualitative responses were coded as ambiguous, favorable, or unfavorable. On average, 11.5% were coded as ambiguous and 72.9% were coded as favorable. Only 1.9% were coded as unfavorable. No significant statistical differences existed between minority or non-minority presenters.

Inter-rater reliability was $r = .84$.

In the qualitative data, 56.3% of evaluations for non-white presenters contained comments on the content of the presentation and 63.4% of evaluations for female presenters contained comments on the content of the presentation. In both cases, the majority of attendees valued what the presenter was talking about more than how the presenter presented their information. The audience's praise was not amplified for how well the presenter presented but rather for how relevant the topic was.

Persons completing the conference evaluations tended to rate a presentation higher if they valued the content of the presentation, but also if they found the presenter entertaining, or if the style of the presentation was done well.

In summary, we found no significant differences in conference evaluations of minority presenters for the four years of this study to examine the race, gender, or ability/disability of the conference presenters. A significant difference existed, however, for the LGBTQ presenters. The audience preferred the performance "Everyone is Gay" to presenters who did not identify their sexual orientation during their presentations. According to the evaluations, the audience found this presentation entertaining, fun, comedic, and easy-going. One participant remarked, "They put a light spin on a heavy topic."

Concluding Discussion

According to the response amplification theory, an audience is more likely to praise a presentation by a minority-status person because the presentation exceeded their expectations. Our research showed no support for response amplification theory, which posits that the audience will praise a presenter of minority status somewhat unfairly if that presenter succeeds. However, our research shows that the audience of presenters of minority status commented more so on the content of the presentation, and did not excessively praise presenters on their presentation style or the entertainment of the presentation.

Some support existed for the research of Kite and Whitley (1996) that lesbian women may be viewed more favorably and less critically than gay men are viewed. Their meta-analytic techniques compare men's and women's attitudes toward homosexual persons, homosexual behaviors, and gay people's civil rights. Men were more negative than women were toward homosexual persons and homosexual behavior, but both sexes viewed gay civil rights similarly. Men's attitudes toward homosexual persons were particularly negative when the person being rated was a gay man or of unspecified sex. Women and men evaluated lesbians similarly⁷. Our anonymous conference evaluations did not contain self-identifying information, so further research on attitudes of the evaluators based on gender toward gay and lesbian performers is needed.

The degree to which the current research can be generalized across individuals and settings is questionable, but the favorable evaluation ratings appear to support the effectiveness of the diversity conference on the evaluations of diversity presenters by diversity conference attendees. Additional research should be conducted to determine before-conference attitudes and after-conference attitudes of the conference attendees.

Overall, qualitative and quantitative data provided no support for ambiguity theory or response amplification theory. Conference evaluations appeared to have ratings of minority presenters as wholly favorable without noticeable cognitive dissonance in the responses. Although humans occupy a number of social groups in the same social/political public space, conference attendees' perceptions of diversity of individual conference presenters did *not* seem to affect differences in evaluations of quality and performance of conference presenters.

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Endnotes

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