Diversity Training in a University Context: The explanatory value of the theory of planned behaviour

Jackson, K., Faifua, D., Hansen, D. & Grimmer, M.

School of Management,
University of Tasmania.
Hobart, Australia
katiej@utas.edu.au
ABSTRACT

Studies on workplace diversity generally focus on the business case for diversity or minority group issues such as work-life balance and differential access. Less attention has been given to diversity training and studies in this area examine needs assessment, design and implementation, and evaluation, rather than the factors that affect motivation of participants to learn and the transfer of training. The theory of planned behaviour (TPB) predicts that learning and transfer of training are governed by attitudes, subjective norms and perceptions of control (Ajzen, 1991) and Wiethoff (2004) adopts the (TPB) to study learning from diversity training as the model can be used to better understand factors that affect an individual’s intention to learn from diversity training. However, Wiethoff’s (2004) work does not consider the influence of compliance on the motivation to learn and transfer of training. We argue compliance plays a key role in the relationship between attitudes, subjective norms and perceptions of control and thus the predictive value of the TPB. Consequently, this paper proposes a research strategy to test the importance of voluntary versus non-voluntary compliance (as a variable previously omitted in studies adopting TPB in diversity training), and testing the relationship between the factors of the TPB.

Introduction

Transfer of training is arguably one of the most significant outcomes for organisations investing in diversity training. Campbell, Dunnette, Lawler & Weick 1970 argue transfer of training may be defined as a “planned learning experience designed to bring about a permanent change in an individual’s knowledge, attitudes or skills” (cited in Baharim & Van Gramberg, 2004:1). For the purpose of our study we argue the degree to which participants value diversity training (i.e. their attitude towards training, the organisational norms that support diversity training, and whether individuals perceive they control or have the ultimate say over diversity issues) determines the degree of training transfer. This definition fits with Ajzen (1991) and Wiethoff’s (2004) postulations that intention is the main determinant of behaviour, and that intention itself is a function of attitude towards behaviour, subjective
norms pertaining to behaviour and level of perceived behavioural control. By definition, effective training transfer results in altered intentions, norms and behaviour (See figure 1).

**FIGURE 1 THEORY OF PLANNED BEHAVIOUR**

However, for effective training transfer to occur, the trainee must not only be motivated to learn from the training but also be able to apply what they have learnt in the organisation. Of the $100 billion organisations spend on diversity training annually, it is believed only 10 percent of what is spent on training can is applied as behaviour in the workplace (Gist, Bavetta & Stevens, 1990: 501). The remaining 90 percent of money spent is lost somewhere in the transfer of training. As Tate (2004: 57) explains it, there is often a void between what is learnt and what can be readily applied outside the classroom. Improving the return in investment yielded by diversity training may be a matter of reducing the proportion of training that is never transferred out of the training classroom. Motivation to learn is admittedly only one way of approaching the problem of limited training transfer, the potentially unsupportive climate of many organisations towards diversity training also requires attention but was considered too large in scope for this study.

In light of the importance of motivation to learn from diversity training, we believe there is considerable merit in testing the importance of voluntary versus non-voluntary compliance so as to test the underlying assumption of intentionality, as well as testing the relationship
between the factors of the TPB; i.e. the attitudes of the individuals, the prevailing norms in
the organization, and the control the individuals believe they have over behaviour (see figure
2).

FIGURE 2 WIETHOFF’S THEORY OF PLANNED BEHAVIOUR (with the addition of voluntary versus involuntary attendance at training as used in this study).

From EEO - to the Business Case - to Learning

The dominant Equal Employment Opportunity approach is the fairness and assimilation
approach as it focuses on the similarities between individuals and encourages conformity to a
desired norm – usually that of the typical white male (Dass & Parker, 1999). Thomas and Ely
(1996: 220) believe that the assimilation approach had some merit but went too far in the
direction of ‘same-ness’, stifling the unique qualities that individuals can bring to their work.
Moreover, Thorpe & Braithwaite (2004: 47) describe the assimilation approach as a melting
pot from which everyone ideally emerges the same but notes the melting pot is “getting
lumpier” as differences begin to be embraced.
A popular diversity approach to emerge has been the business case argument, also known as the access and legitimacy approach (Dass & Parker, 1999). The business case literature ties diversity to the corporate bottom line by advocating the economic benefits of a diverse workforce. The business benefits include stronger customer relations (Saloman & Schork, 2003: 38), reduced employee turnover (Richardson, 2004: 2), increased creativity (Tomlinson & Egan, 2002: 81; Richard & Kirby, 1999: 112) and retention of customers (Bruno, 2004: 47). For many, the business case was hailed as a breakthrough in terms of diversifying the workforce as minorities began to be welcomed into organisations rather than merely tolerated. However, many believe that the business case has gone too far in emphasizing the differences between employees (Thomas and Ely, 1996: 220).

Despite the widespread literary support for the business case, De Meuse & Hostager (2001: 33) and Jayne & Dipboye, (2004: 410) argue the majority of the literature is normative with little empirical support for the claims being made. Indeed, in 1996 the Business Opportunities for Leadership Diversity (BOLD) Initiative was commissioned with the intention of addressing the paucity of information about the commercial sense behind the business case (Kochan et al, 2003). The findings of the BOLD Initiative are that diversity in the workplace is fraught with difficulty and can actually lead to reduced performance and higher stress and turnover (Kochan et al, 2003: 5). The empirical evidence suggests diversity cannot just happen; a change in workforce structure must be accompanied by effective and sufficient training to alter employee attitudes and behaviours.

Diversity training is not new and has been implemented in various forms in organisations adopting the fairness and assimilation and or the access and legitimation approaches. In 2003, organisations in the United States spent an estimated $8 billion on various forms of diversity training (Hansen, 2003). While diversity training is implemented with the intention of altering and the attitudes and behaviours of employees there is often no needs assessment (Cox & Blake, 1991: 53), design and implementation are also often poor, and there is frequently little
or no evaluation of diversity outcomes (Kochan, et. al., 2003). Moreover, there have been numerous cases of high profile companies gaining notoriety for bad diversity courses. For example, the Texaco Oil Company recently suffered heavy penalties following a diversity course in which African American employees were likened to black jelly beans at the bottom of the jar (De Meuse & Hostager, 2001: 33).

According to Tan, Romero & Morris (1996: 54) the frequently disappointing results of diversity training are due to the fact organisations do not design, or least do not commission anyone to design diversity training specifically for the organisation, rather they rely on a “one size fits all” approach. In reality, each workplace is unique in terms of prevailing attitudes and norms towards diversity. An understanding of attitudes towards diversity prior to training could help human resource development officers decide which employees should be trained from an attitude change perspective – the most commonly offered version of diversity training and who should receive skills based training. Kirkwood and Pangarkar (2003) and Sloman & Al Dowayan (2004) advocate the utility of tailoring training to the individual rather than the group, although financial and time constraints might limit the ability to deliver personalised training.

The learning paradigm or approach has emerged as a critique of the fairness and assimilation and access and legitimacy approaches (Thomas & Ely 1996). It advocates diversity must be premised on the acknowledgment of the ideas and ways of working which people from different backgrounds bring to the organisation. By definition it requires employees to learn and embrace the ideas of people with different values and backgrounds. The TPB has been used to predict a range of behaviours such as hunting intention (Hrubes & Ajzen, 2001), dishonesty (Beck & Ajzen, 1991) and quitting smoking (Wilkinson & Abraham, 2004: 315). Only recently has Wiethoff (2004) adapted the theory of planned behaviour to diversity training and a learning approach. We believe this is an important move in the diversity training literature as it recognises training does not automatically result in training transfer.
TPB and Diversity in a University Setting

We the researchers have chosen to examine the concept of transfer of diversity training in a university setting because of the unique diversity perspective offered in academia. It might appear reasonable to assume that diversity in universities would not suffer the hindrances that occur in more commercial organisations due to the perceived merit based systems in place. However, on closer inspection, it appears that individuals who differ from the image of the default academic experience very similar pressures to their commercially based counterparts.

The relatively low number of female academics both in Australia and worldwide is a testament to the difficulties faced in achieving tenure, and the sharp decline in numbers of female academics above level B suggests that the hierarchical ladder is an arduous climb. Beoku-Betts (2004) found that less than a third of the faculty in most US universities is made up of female academics and that the women that have achieved tenure rarely make it to professorship.

The existing diversity paradigms tend to pertain to profit motivated industries and overlook the field of academia to an extent. This is perhaps because of the view that success in education and research is believed to be dictated by merit. Publishing output and teaching proficiency are deemed to be under the control of the individual and as such objectively measurable. However, White explains that this is not necessarily the case, a number of institutional factors act as obstacles to the progression of women and minorities in universities. These factors include things like the “boys club” mentality of most universities and the fierce competitiveness of most academics (White, 2003: 45). Interestingly, White remarks that one of the more notable recognitions of the difficulties faced by women in academia came from the outgoing Vice-Chancellor, Professor Don Aitkin, at the University of Canberra. In his last address as Vice-Chancellor, Professor Aitkin spoke of the
institutionalized nature of universities and the pressing need to recognise that the “old boys network” and “boys club” mentality exclude women and prevent them from achieving the status they otherwise could. He adds the battle will not be won if women are rewarded for replicating male behaviours; rather, changes need to be made so that women can succeed based on their own competencies and characteristics (Aitkin, 2001).

Unfortunately, while Professor Aitkin may recognise these problems, he is perhaps in the minority. In the same year as the above mentioned address, the President of Harvard University aired his opinion that females rarely achieve faculty positions in science and engineering because they are not suited to, nor do they wish to pursue, careers in academic science or engineering (Dillon & Rimer, 2005).

Jackson (2004) explains that an Affirmative Action focus is not enough, the number of women or minorities at each level is only a number, the real story can only be understood by examining the difficulties faced by those who do achieve higher level positions. Jackson studied 19 research oriented universities in the US with the intention of assessing the performance of women and minorities in teaching, research and service. Having controlled for tenure, status and full time equivalency, the conclusion was that traditional white males were outperformed in each of the categories. This conclusion corresponds similar findings, that women and minorities regularly report a need to perform better than their male colleagues to achieve similar, and even less, recognition (White, 2004).

The current research into diversity in the university setting has not yet moved into the learning paradigm. Combining the two will be an interesting exercise because of the highly educated nature of the subjects under investigation. One may presume that learning from training would be a given in an institution where learning is the main output. However, the difficulties faced by women and minorities appear to tell a different story.
The Research Method

Wiethoff’s (2004) model of TPB will be used to test the importance of voluntary versus non-voluntary compliance (as a variable previously omitted in studies adopting TPB in diversity training) in diversity training of staff at the University of Tasmania. All staff will be invited to respond to a survey whether or not they have undergone diversity training. Staff who completed diversity training will be asked whether they participated as part of an employment requirement (for compliance reasons). This will identify whether participation was voluntary and non-voluntary.

Differences in attitude towards diversity training, perceptions about the organisational sentiment towards diversity and training and perceptions about self control over behaviour towards diversity training will be examined by looking for differences between gender and status in the hierarchy. Additionally, differences will be sought between academic and general staff and age cohorts.

References

www.canberra.edu.au/secretariat/speeches/vcaddr25-7-01


