Achieving Diversity

April 30, 2014

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Psychological research has shown the value of diversity in improving the quality of decisions while also promoting social and cultural goals of providing equal opportunity regardless of social-group membership. Although we generally think of diversity goals as assuring that every person of equal talent has an equal chance of being represented, psychological research also shows that diversity helps diminish the invisible but persistent psychological barriers that emerge from being a member of an underrepresented group. For example, social psychological research finds that female students in science, technology, engineering, and math disciplines who have more female professors show more self-efficacy and commitment to pursue STEM disciplines themselves (Stout et al., 2011). Today in all sectors of society, diversity is an acknowledged goal of professional organizations and businesses. This commitment, of course, leads to the challenging question of how an organization achieves diversity.

At APS, we have to start by asking the question: Are we achieving our goals for diversity? Some have suggested we are not, while others think that we’re doing fine. The truth is, for many forms of diversity that we care about, we don’t really know. Although social groups defined by gender, institution, or geography can usually be determined from the types of data submitted when one signs up for APS membership, submits a paper to an APS journal, or submits to present at the APS Annual Convention, we are unable to determine membership in other social groups, such as those defined by race and ethnicity, from our standard submission procedures. As the leading international organization for the experimental study of psychology, this lack of accounting is somewhat surprising. If decades of attitude
research has taught us anything, it is that no one is immune to the subtle and persistent biases that results from our cultural stereotypes — not even those of us with good intentions. Because we are the discipline that leads in generating evidence about the harm from unconscious bias, we should also lead in assessing ourselves.

The APS board has decided that diversity in our organization is something we should no longer speculate about. We should not only know how we are doing on diversity but also be able to quantify our status and our progress. The APS board has recently appointed a Diversity Committee and a staff member to oversee this Diversity Initiative at APS. The initial Diversity Committee is comprised of APS Board Members Wendy Berry Mendes, Suparna Rajaram, and Gün Semin; incoming APS President Nancy Eisenberg; Past President Mahzarin R. Banaji; Chair of the APS Publications Committee, Henry L. Roediger, III; and me. This committee is charged with evaluating diversity at APS and determining if we are meeting our diversity goals and what we can do better. To start, however, we need to know how we are doing. So being the experimental psychologists that we are, we need the data.

Some of the data we seek can be gleaned from past records of publications, convention presentations, and membership, and the APS staff will take on the challenging task of reviewing these records. However, for other data we believe we should have, we need to start from scratch. Don’t be surprised if the next time you renew your APS membership, submit a paper to an APS journal, or submit to present at the APS convention, you are asked to provide a bit more information about yourself. This is completely voluntary, of course, but it is our way to start to get the data we need to evaluate our status in terms of diversity.

Of course, knowing how we are doing is just the start. By quantifying our diversity profile, we can identify the barriers that exist and the subtle ways we might be undermining our efforts to achieve goals of promoting diversity. This is necessary because APS is determined to create access to the best science that is being done through its high-impact journals and well-attended conventions. APS is committed to recognizing the best scientists for their work. To do our job well, we need to create an organization that represents the full range of existing members and even potential members. By explicit openness to all individuals — especially those who do not see others like themselves among us — and by specific attention to the topics we choose to represent and the individuals we bring to the world’s attention at conventions, we play a role in shaping the future of psychological science. Our analysis of who we are and how well we represent the field is the first step in ensuring that psychological science remains strong and vibrant, but in the future we would like to go further. As the organization that represents the scientific study of psychology internationally, we would like to provide insights into how other organizations might meet their diversity goals. But we will start by listening to our own science and evaluating ourselves.