

COMMENTARY

(Conditionally) Supporting polycultural organizations through bidirectional allyship

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Valenzuela and Bernardo's (2023) focal article underscores the need to add polycultural ideology to existing diversity management perspectives in order to further enhance how organizations manage diversity. As the authors mention, despite an organization's best efforts, reports across professional entities and policy institutes continue to indicate a prevalence of racial-ethnic discrimination and conflict within the workplace. To ease such challenges and improve intercultural relations within organizations, the authors outline the potential benefits of polyculturalism—which draws from a polycultural ideology that sees cultural values, traditions, and norms as fundamentally connected, dynamically intertwined, and ever-changing (Morris et al., 2015; Rosenthal & Levy, 2010). The authors offer examples of practice implications and strategies to create polycultural organizations (i.e., leadership, diversity training, and socialization). In this commentary, we highlight an additional strategy for creating a polycultural organization: bidirectional allyship.

Drawing from the works of scholars like Salter and Migliaccio (2019), we argue that allyship, specifically bidirectional allyship—as conceptualized by Scaramuzzo et al. (2021)—can serve as a proactive diversity management tool for enhancing inclusion, redressing discrimination, and challenging inequities in the workplace. Given this, we expand on this focal article by discussing how bidirectional allyship aligns with and diverges from the principles of polyculturalism—namely, its increased emphasis on the interconnectedness of cultures and decreased emphasis on cultural differences—as well as how this kind of allyship can serve as a mechanism through which polycultural organizations can be constructed, supported, and fortified.

Bidirectional allyship

Bidirectional allyship encapsulates how different social groups, of varying privilege and marginalization, may aid one another in fighting for justice and the rights of their *own and each other's* interrelated communities (e.g., Black heterosexual females and cisgender White gay males; Scaramuzzo et al., 2021). As described by Scaramuzzo et al. (2021; p. 395), within bidirectional allyship, each minoritized group is “traveling within their own lane down a collectively traveled highway” where allyship develops intuitively and organically and involves open communication, empathy, and respectful awareness of the othering of each social identity represented.

To understand why bidirectional allyship can be useful within the workplace setting, it is important to consider one's intersectionality. The theoretical framework of intersectionality allows for the conceptualization of the relationship between multiple social identities that reflect one's unique positionality within the interwoven systems of power, unearned privilege, and

disadvantage (Carastathis, 2014; Crenshaw, 1989). An intersectional approach to allyship allows us to acknowledge and consider the possibility of individuals being marginalized in one aspect of their identity while still holding power and privilege in another. For example, a gay cisgender White male, in certain contexts, might be marginalized based on their sexual orientation but privileged based on racial and gender identity. This continuous evaluation and awareness of one's privilege and power, relevant to other members of marginalized groups within the workplace setting, can ultimately inform one's use of their own privilege and power to better support and advocate for other individuals or groups of people.

We believe bidirectional allyship can be a useful tool for reinforcing the ideational framework of polyculturalism because, like polyculturalism, bidirectional allyship also focuses on the interrelatedness of groups and lived experiences, and highlights the ever-changing systems and intergroup relations based on historical and continuous interactions.

Bidirectional allyship as a vehicle for polyculturalism

We posit that the tenets of polyculturalism can be made explicit, and cultivated, through the practice of bidirectional allyship. The practice of bidirectional allyship can create cultural artifacts (e.g., norms, practices, roles) that reinforce polycultural ideologies within an organization. For example, identifying as an ally is a necessary (though insufficient; Anderson & Accomando, 2016) condition for the role and duties of this form of activism. Through socialization, bidirectional allyship identities can be developed within organizations to institute the practice of mutual support. Creating strong bidirectional allyship identities within an organization offers the opportunity for bottom-up influences to shape and change an organization's culture. Allyship identity development which considers the complexities of intersecting identities and associated sources of power, privilege, and disadvantage can be useful to support a unique form of collaborative intercultural contact. For example, the allyship identity of Hispanic men can be better enhanced by considering the intersection of race and gender, rather than focusing solely on the identity issues related to the allyship role. Further, allyship identity development that considers bidirectionality or a mutual system of support may offer greater opportunity for allies to develop complex relational ties, supporting increased identity fusion.

Bidirectional allyship as an enabler of interconnectedness, adjacency, and recognition of patterns

Although multiculturalism is often promoted in diversity management approaches, Valenzuela and Bernardo (2023) highlight challenges associated with an overemphasis on cultural differences. Borrowing from Valenzuela and Bernardo's example, within a polycultural organization, a Hispanic executive would be expected to leverage cultural interconnections to expand within the Hispanic market as well as into other markets such as the Black or Asian markets. In a similar instance, where a Hispanic executive may be asked to transcend their own experiences and background to create more equitable and inclusive organizational policies and practices for other groups of people, bidirectional allyship can provide an actionable exemplar for forming coalitions based on similar lived experiences. Bidirectional allyship explains the formation of such coalitions with other marginalized groups through the recognition of patterns and adjacency among respective but aligned movements and goals (Corrigan, 2019). The Hispanic executive can advocate for the creation of inroads for reducing barriers for Black and Asian communities and support their fight for the advancement of their identities through small daily actions like correcting someone who is using incorrect pronouns when speaking of another employee.

The value of understanding and being aware of intergroup differences

Although we recognize the value in de-emphasizing differences within a polycultural organization to make employees feel more included and to reduce intergroup conflict and discrimination, we believe differences do not need to be de-emphasized to further emphasize the interrelatedness of cultural differences. In line with bidirectional allyship, we believe that deeply understanding differences in experiences and challenges facing different groups will only strengthen the parallels one can draw across groups and inform how groups can work in solidarity with one another instead of *on behalf of* the other. We envision the latter occurring between different groups within polycultural organizations due to a developed sense of identity fusion, or a sense of oneness with the group. Although such perceived connectedness to a group has been shown to produce more powerful prosocial behaviors, we argue that such fusion of identities could potentially blur one's evaluation and awareness of their own privilege and power within the organizational context due to their recategorization of themselves through these common connections. As such, we argue that actively practicing self-awareness and developing a greater understanding of differences in lived experiences, backgrounds, and cultures (per multiculturalism) can lead to more effective bidirectional allyship efforts in the workplace. In line with our argument, recent research has also shown that allyship attempts that were labeled as ineffective were typically characterized by a lack of awareness of a marginalized group member's needs and one's own privilege as a potential ally (e.g., Collier-Spruel & Ryan, 2022).

How bidirectional allyship can be enacted in organizations

As mentioned previously, bidirectional allyship can serve as a practical and actionable strategy to create and sustain a polycultural organization. To be enacted, bidirectional allyship, requires, first, that individuals recognize their ordinary privileges, based on aspects of their identities. Ordinary privilege has been described as the “headache you do not know that you do not have” (DiFranco, 2006 in Greenwood et al., 2017) and provides opportunities for anyone to serve as an ally (Chugh, 2018). Individuals are often prompted to recognize their ordinary privileges through consideration of intersectionality, personal reflection, and conversations with others who are marginalized. Discussions and efforts to uncover ordinary privileges can be facilitated through targeted diversity, equity, and inclusion initiatives. Once ordinary privileges are recognized and acknowledged, the holders of such privileges can take additional steps to unlearn and relearn and transfer learning into committed action in support of those who lack the same advantages. This can begin on a small scale (e.g., in dyads or small groups) and then extend across an organization.

One example of how bidirectional allyship can be enacted—beyond the individual level—and leveraged across organizations is through employee resource groups (ERGs), also commonly known as affinity groups. Despite ERGs being individual internal communities of employees with shared social identities or interests, we usually see ERGs working in solidarity with one another to co-construct inclusive work environments and provide beneficial momentum to each other's respective, yet aligned, causes. For example, within SIOP, Blacks in I-O, Asians in I-O, and Latinos in I-O have created partnerships to increase the presence and uplift the voices of underrepresented groups within industrial-organizational psychology. Even though individual ERGs have their own mission statements and strategies, members of different ERGs may intentionally form these unilateral support systems based on shared experiences of identity-based marginalization to push forth necessary changes to workplace policy and practices, increase fairness across groups, and amplify each group's voice among larger, more represented groups within the organization.

Conclusion

In this commentary, we present bidirectional allyship as a practical diversity management tool, allowing for actionable ways to address and reduce discrimination while enhancing inclusion, and as a potential mechanism through which polycultural organizations can be supported and fortified. We note that, to some extent, the tenets of polycultural ideology align well with bidirectional allyship. Yet, we argue that certain aspects of multiculturalism (i.e., learning about group differences) better support the positive potential of bidirectional allyship in nurturing mutually supportive relationships for people with marginalized identities. In summary, we suggest, in line with others (e.g., Rosenthal & Levy, 2012), that a hybrid ideology incorporating the strengths of multiculturalism and polyculturalism may be promising.

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