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# Multicultural Competencies for I-O Psychologists: Why and How?

**Donna Chrobot-Mason**  
University of Colorado Denver

**Bernardo M. Ferdman**  
Alliant University

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There has been an explosion of attention by social scientists, organizational researchers, and practitioners directed at the implications of diversity for organizations. Beyond the changing demographics of the workplace, globalization and the increasing reliance on teams challenge us to find effective ways to fully tap into every person's potential contributions and to help organizations use differences as resources rather than liabilities. As organizations increasingly span across national borders in both their operations and their markets, and the United States workforce becomes more and more diverse, I-O psychologists have begun to recognize the importance of expanding our field to incorporate multicultural and international issues and to question the application of traditional perspectives in theory and research across diverse settings and peoples. Globalization and diversity thus present science and practice in I-O psychology with unique challenges and opportunities. These challenges strike at the heart of the issues addressed by our field and stand squarely at the junction of research and practice. Core areas such as motivation, leadership, group dynamics, performance appraisal, selection, organizational development and many others can be enhanced by a clear understanding of diversity and multiculturalism and how these affect organizational behavior. Yet, training and professional development of I-O practitioners and academics has typically not kept pace with these developments.

Last year at the SIOP Conference in New Orleans, a diverse group of academics and practitioners held a panel discussion on the development of multicultural competencies for I-O psychologists. Panel members included cochairs Bernardo M. Ferdman and Donna Chrobot-Mason, former SIOP President Angelo DeNisi, Steven Jones, Karen May and Dana McDonald-Mann. Panel members and audience participants were asked to address the following questions: (a) Why are multicultural competencies necessary for effective practice in I-O psychology? (b) What are your current or desired multicultural competencies and how have you developed them? and (c) What suggestions do you have for I-O psychologists to develop and strengthen multicultural competencies? This article presents a summary of each panelist's contribution to the discussion.

**Donna Chrobot-Mason** (Assistant Professor of Psychology, University of Colorado at Denver). Unlike I-O psychology, other disciplines, particularly counseling psychology, have considered the issue of multicultural competency more extensively. Beginning in the early 1980s, counseling psychologists developed and refined a list of competencies to define what is meant by multicultural competency for counselors. This list focuses on awareness, knowledge, and skills that psychologists need for effective practice, including (a) understanding experiences of members of various cultural groups, (b) understanding barriers to communication across cultures, and (c) possessing specific abilities that make one culturally skilled (Pope-Davis & Dings, 1995). It is important to consider how these competencies might apply to our field and also to consider the unique skills that we as I-O psychologists need now and in the future.

Counseling psychologists have also investigated the process of developing multicultural competencies. Sue, Arredondo, and McDavis (1992) suggest that these develop as a counselor becomes aware of his or her own assumptions, values and biases, begins to better understand the worldview of those who are different, and develops appropriate strategies and techniques for dealing with racial issues. Generally, the literature outlines a three-phase developmental process involving self-awareness, skill building, and ongoing developmental activities. This developmental process may be useful as a framework to guide our efforts in I-O psychology as we consider multicultural training for ourselves, our students, and our clients (Chrobot-Mason, 2001). Awareness may come in the form of understanding the barriers various subgroups face in the workplace and knowing how to break down such barriers. Skill building may involve learning how to foster diverse ideas and opinions in work groups and to facilitate cross-cultural communication. Finally, continuous development might involve ongoing activities to increase one's understanding of diversity issues and to consistently broaden one's comfort zone in interacting with people who are different.

**Bernardo M. Ferdman** (Professor and Program Director, College of Organizational Studies, Alliant University, San Diego, California). Because our motivation to develop skills and to behave in particular ways derives both from our individual characteristics and from the organizational and institutional contexts in which we are embedded, multicultural competence can be seen as an attribute of both individuals and of organizations (Ferdman & Gallegos, 1996). The culture of an organization is likely to influence the competencies and attitudes of its individual members. For this reason, the development of multicultural competence is not solely an individual responsibility (cf. Ferdman & Brody, 1996).

At Alliant University, it is a core value to train practitioners with multicultural competencies. Because Alliant's broad mission includes fighting discrimination, serving the underserved, and addressing social issues, the faculty adopted a statement of responsibilities and values regarding multiculturalism. This serves as a framework within which faculty can hold each other accountable in this regard. As an implementation measure, the faculty in the College of Organizational Studies agreed to articulate a set of multicultural competencies for I-O psychologists, against which the curriculum and programs could be

assessed and enhanced. Alliant's organizational faculty saw this as a unique, distinctive, and useful initiative for the institution. It is also a way to both serve and push the field, because although there are guidelines for education and training in I-O psychology, these are mostly silent with regards to diversity. Essentially, the underlying notion is that, eventually, basic competencies in I-O psychology will have to be defined in the context of a multicultural world. One example is as follows: Multiculturally competent I-O psychologists are aware of the potential biases of assessment materials, measures, and instruments as a function of culture and other differences.

**Karen E. May** (Principal, Terranova Consulting Group, San Francisco). From Karen's perspective, the environment in which we and our clients work is changing radically, providing many good reasons to pay attention to multicultural competence. In her comments, she described the characteristics that underlie being multiculturally proficient. A key one is listening skills. To be aware, according to Karen, one should be a good listener and have an investigative nature that makes one curious and open to what other people might bring to the picture. A second skill is open-mindedness. This means being aware that there are many ways to do the same things and achieve the same goals. The third skill is an ability to challenge assumptions first to be able to challenge one's own assumptions, and then to help others do the same. A fourth ability is self-awareness and recognizing where one's biases are. Karen gave an example of being stimulated to do this in a visit to the Museum of Tolerance in Los Angeles. At the beginning of the exhibits there are two doors: one marked Prejudiced, the other marked Not Prejudiced. Visitors must self-identify as either prejudiced or non-prejudiced and go through the door of their choice. It turns out that the non-prejudiced door does not open! The point is that we all have prejudices we need to be aware of and try to challenge ourselves around them. A fifth skill is tolerance. It is critical to cultivate an ability to be tolerant, and to recognize intolerance in others as being more frustration or fear rather than a direct attack. The last skill is the knowledge of norms and values of other groups with which one interacts.

Most of Karen's multicultural competency has developed from real-world experience and real-time learning from doing it wrong, having people help her understand what she did wrong, and then trying to figure out how to do it differently next time. Another source of competency has been studying the diversity literature, and yet another is intentional awareness raising. Karen has made a conscious effort in her own learning to try to walk into a room or a new client situation, ask herself what assumptions she is bringing, and then test them out to see if she needs to make modifications.

**Steven Jones** (CEO, Jones & Associates Consulting; Doctoral candidate in I-O psychology, Alliant University, San Diego). For Steven, developing multicultural competency centers on knowing our own culture, and being aware of the lenses people look through to interpret the world around us. For example, Steven spoke about preparing for the panel by adapting to the formal and informal definitions of competent presentations according to SIOPs culture. Had the room been filled with a group of fellow African Americans at an Association of Black Psychologists conference, Steven's cultural style of communication would have been very different. My language, the pace, the rhythm of my speech would also be very different, Steven pointed out. So, the first consideration in becoming multiculturally competent is to be competent in the way a particular group views and defines competency itself.

As consultants and I-O psychologists, it is also important to be aware of the various levels of culture. Culture is more than race and gender. For example, Steven points out, I cannot apply the same techniques in the same way to front-line blue collar workers as I would to senior-level executives. I have to go through a translation, because these are different cultures. This translation is important so that individuals in each of those cultures see you as effective; this is what it means to be multiculturally competent. Culture is like an iceberg; the tip of the iceberg—things like language, dress, food, and rituals—is often the single focus of many diversity efforts. For example, an organization may try to leverage diversity by holding a fair where people dress up in different clothes and eat foods from various cultures. Yet many diversity efforts never address cultural issues such as differences in personal space, eye contact, communication styles, and the like. These are some of the same issues that lie further beneath the surface of culture that create many of the conflicts within the workplace. To be effective, a multiculturally competent consultant will recommend an appropriate organizational intervention after sorting through the various layers of diversity below the surface level.

**Angelo DeNisi** (Professor of Business Administration, Head of the Management Department, and Director, Center for Human Resource Management, Texas A&M University). Having grown up in a working class neighborhood in the Bronx in New York City and as the only member of his family to attend college, Angelo felt his move to College Station, Texas was more than moving somewhere that seemed like another world—it really was another world (at this point he claimed to be just kidding). College Station, Texas is another culture than the Bronx, including differences in values, beliefs, language, and views on the world. If we really want to get serious about multicultural issues, we do not have to travel outside of the country at all—there are many different cultures inside the United States. One way to gain sensitivity toward multicultural issues is to be more aware of these differences, both across countries as well as within our own country.

Another issue to consider is the extent to which psychological constructs and research findings generalize across cultures. For example, Angelo spoke of a conversation he had with a group of researchers in Hong Kong whose productivity was judged based on U.S. publications. These researchers explained that they often have a difficult time publishing in American journals. When an article is submitted to a U.S. journal, based on data collected from a bank in Shanghai, the journal editor is likely to ask the question: How do we know if that bank in Hong Kong generalizes to a bank in New York? Yet, if you collect data from a bank in New York, no one will even ask you if it generalizes to the bank across the street! Additional cross-cultural research is

needed to understand which psychological concepts and/or measures are unique to a specific culture and which have underlying similarities that can be generalizable across cultures. One example of this type of research can be seen in work by Farh, Earley, and Lin (1997), who compared the concepts of social loafing and collectivism in American and Chinese samples. The results demonstrated the need for psychological researchers to be sensitive to the complexity of cross-cultural work.

**Dana McDonald-Mann** (Senior Consultant in Executive Development, DDI, Pittsburgh). When she first entered I-O psychology, Dana's view of traditional theory and practice was targeted toward the experiences of African Americans and women, her own identity groups. But over time, she recognized a need to broaden her own view of diversity to include the experiences of people who are not a part of the majority; however the majority may be defined in a given context. As she began to work with global executives, she was forced to broaden that definition even more, so as to consider not only U.S. implications of cross-cultural dynamics, but also global implications.

Dana always believed that multicultural competencies were important for I-O psychologists. But, as she began to work with organizations particularly globally she more readily came across specific examples of bottom line impacts of some of these competencies. For example, Dana described an incident where she was training an Indian gentleman who was purchasing an instrument to deliver executive feedback. After she spent 2 days training him the right way to do it, he was asked to role-play an effective feedback session. He started the session quite differently than the way Dana had modeled it. He started by talking with the person, asking about their family, whether they had a vacation, did they have somewhere to stay, and so forth. It was expected that he would show concern for them, their families, and their well-being to establish the credibility of this feedback session. Dana pointed out that developing multicultural competencies is an ongoing experience. In addition to self-awareness and openness, she sees genuineness as important. Dana does not think we should approach growth and learning from an intellectual superiority perspective, but rather have a genuine interest in others' experiences and lifestyles, and how these may be different from or similar to our own.

### A Call to Action

Multiple themes emerged from the panel discussion. First, developing multicultural competence takes time and patience. We must allow ourselves the opportunity to make mistakes when we step outside of our comfort zone and learn from such mistakes. Second, it will become increasingly important for I-O psychologists to consider multiple layers of diversity and the organizational context when dealing with diverse clients. Although the conversation to define and develop multicultural competencies has begun, we would like to challenge SIOP and its members to focus greater attention on this issue in the upcoming years. We concluded our discussion and will conclude this article with the following charge: What two steps will you take between today and the next SIOP Conference to (a) enhance your own multicultural competencies and (b) to support the acquisition of multicultural competencies by your students, coworkers, supervisors, and others in your organization? We look forward to dialoguing with you about your responses!

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