Researching Racial Diversity in Organizations

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ABSTRACT

Research on racial diversity in organizations stands at a critical juncture. While the 'business case for diversity' has been supported empirically over decades, the field now faces significant headwinds. Political and institutional pressures, particularly in the Global North, are challenging the legitimacy of Diversity, Equity and Inclusion (DEI) initiatives, creating a complex environment for scholars and practitioners alike. To navigate these tensions and explore the field's horizons, we sat down with Orlando C. Richard, a leading business management scholar at the University of Massachusetts Amherst. Professor Richard is arguably one of the most influential scholars worldwide in the study of racial diversity dynamics within business institutions. In this interview, we sought to understand the historical foundations of his work and his perspective on the field's future. He offers provocative insights into how the current U.S. context regarding DEI challenges creates opportunities that scholars at more progressive universities and researchers from the Global South, particularly in Brazil, can leverage. To this audience, his message offers an opportunity to lead discussions by grounding research in local realities and expanding the boundaries of theoretical frameworks. Furthermore, he outlines a compelling research agenda focused on intersectionality, mega-threats, and racial diversity effects on non-financial metrics.

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Professor, could you briefly tell us what factors contributed to your interest in the study of diversity in organizations, and more specifically, racial diversity? (Humberto Reis, Pedro Jaime, and Renata Andreoni)

Orlando Richard: I grew up in the southern region of the United States, a region historically marked by slavery and Jim Crow laws. My parents experienced segregated schools, and although schools were officially integrated by the time I came along, the culture was often not. Interracial dating was unacceptable, and black and white families lived on opposite sides of the railroad tracks, with better resources going to the white side of town. Even after attending school together for 12 years, my high school class still had separate proms for blacks versus whites.

That context shaped my worldview. When I visited Oklahoma City as a child, I saw a more integrated society with interracial dating, shared neighborhoods, and I questioned why Louisiana was so different. Instead of staying and trying to change my hometown culture from within, I felt compelled to move somewhere already more inclusive but to study these race issues more deeply in academia.

At first, I considered a corporate career, but I also had a strong interest in teaching. I debated between finance and management doctorates before deciding to pursue a PhD in Management focusing on Diversity, Equity and Inclusion (DEI) issues.

Today, the United States landscape is deeply divided, with some universities and corporations trying to keep DEI while others, especially in southern states, are eliminating it. In many places, discussing race or gender in the classroom can lead to termination. Parts of the country, particularly the North and East/West Coast, remain committed to inclusion within their organizational cultures despite having to simultaneously comply with federal laws that seek to eliminate DEI policies altogether. I'm fortunate to live in a region where these topics remain important, despite occasional national attacks on many major universities that are not receptive to abandoning their DEI policies.

Your work links the Resource-Based View (RBV) with Blau's heterogeneity theory. How do you evaluate the role of RBV and heterogeneity frameworks in shifting the diversity debate from a social issue to a strategy and performance focus? What was the intellectual climate enabling this connection? (Humberto Reis, Pedro Jaime, and Renata Andreoni)

Orlando Richard: In business school curricula, much of what I encountered in my doctoral seminars didn't directly address the ideas I was interested in. I looked beyond the assigned readings and turned to sociology, where Blau's heterogeneity theory (Blau, 1979) examined intergroup contact in schools. I began wondering how these dynamics might apply to business institutions, since social contact outside of schools is still social contact in a business setting.

Initially, I considered studying cross-race mentoring, inspired by Thomas's (1989) work on the challenges that arise in mentoring relationships across race and gender. At the same time, I was also intrigued by claims in the popular press that diversity was beneficial for teams and organizations, yet I struggled to find rigorous scientific evidence to support those claims. That gap presented an opportunity: How does diversity affect organizational performance? After discussing my interests with my dissertation advisor, Nancy Brown Johnson, she gave me confidence that I could study racial diversity effects although it had never been investigated at the firm level.

Taylor Cox's work, particularly his Cox and Blake (1991) perspective, offered early arguments for how team diversity could enhance creativity and problem-solving. Cox et al. (1991) also showed that diverse groups could outperform homogeneous ones along specific performance dimensions. That provided me with an initial foundation.

My advisor then introduced me to emerging work in Strategic Human Resource Management (SHRM), which argued that human capital and supportive HR practices could drive performance. She shared an early conference version of a paper eventually published by Delery and Doty (1996). That gave me a preview of the next wave of research in SHRM, building on Mark Huselid's seminal work on HR systems and performance (Huselid, 1995).

From there, I began to think: What if racial diversity could be conceptualized as a valuable source of human capital? And what if diversity management practices, those designed specifically to include underrepresented groups, could be understood as a particular type of HR system? I built a more fine-grained framework focused explicitly on diversity-related practices, drawing on Delery and Doty's (1996) universalistic and contingency perspectives. Their work opened the door for me to explore whether the effects of racial diversity and diversity practices depended on the context, especially business strategy.

Building on this, I then proposed that aligning racial diversity with organizational strategy should enhance firm financial performance. That idea became the core of my 2000 paper (Richard, 2000), which sought to align racial diversity in organizations with the overall business strategy. I drew heavily from the strategic HR literature, which had

adapted Jay Barney and Patrick Wright's knowledge-based view to emphasize the value of human capital (Barney & Wright, 1998). Framing racial diversity as a source of differentiated knowledge enabled me to argue that diverse racial groups contribute distinct knowledge bases that can benefit the firm.

The intellectual climate shaping my work combined early SHRM theory, emerging knowledge-based views, and diversity work by scholars like Taylor Cox. These strands bridged Blau's sociological heterogeneity theory and strategic management approaches to study racial diversity.

The field is mainly shaped by U.S. scholars and institutions, boosting the business case for diversity. How do you view this paradigm's impact on research about racial diversity in organizations amid current U.S. political and institutional pressures? (Humberto Reis, Pedro Jaime, and Renata Andreoni)

Orlando Richard: My view is a bit more optimistic than that of many of my colleagues, who are emotionally drained from watching many major U.S. universities request that faculty limit DEI research and avoid race and gender topics in the classroom. From the northern U.S., I see an opportunity: to attract talented southern scholars discouraged by legislative pressures to discontinue their DEI research and teaching, giving northern institutions a competitive edge. At the same time, the uncertainty regarding visas and the political risks linked to diversity research are displacing scholars from the U.S. toward other countries where universities encourage them to continue their DEI research, a shift that ultimately surrenders global preeminence in this academic domain to other nations.

For Brazil, for example, this moment represents a clear chance to fill the gap. There is still substantial, unfinished work to be done on racial diversity in organizations, particularly in global and comparative contexts. Just because the pace of research is slowing in the U.S. does not mean it should slow elsewhere. In fact, it should accelerate.

As for the business case for diversity, one might expect CEOs and boards to remain consistently engaged with the issue, especially given the evidence. But national-level pressures often cause organizations to retreat. Companies that were once publicly committed begin to deprioritize DEI when the political environment changes. If leadership was already lukewarm, the shifting context becomes an easy justification to withdraw resources and attention. This retrenchment doesn't only affect DEI initiatives; it spills over into corporate social responsibility more broadly, including environmental commitments (e.g., climate change).

We see this pattern in several firms that have scaled back their diversity efforts despite previously benefiting from them. Target is an example, where it responded to political and customer pressure by scaling back DEI initiatives. So even though the business case is empirically supported, the national context can override evidence and shape how organizations behave.

For scholars in the Global South, like Brazil and South Africa, racial divisions stem from distinct histories and cultures. What adjustments are necessary for our theories to effectively address racial diversity outside North America? (Humberto Reis, Pedro Jaime and Renata Andreoni)

Orlando Richard: One of the most important issues to address is construct definition, specifically how racial categories are understood and operationalized in each country, and whether these categories make scientific sense. Just because a government creates official classifications and assigns people to those categories does not necessarily mean those categories are meaningful for academic research.

In the U.S., the biracial category recorded by the Census and the EEOC is almost unusable for scientific research. A person labeled biracial might be half Asian and Black or half White and Black, with distinct cultural backgrounds, but still lumped together under one label. Similarly, 'Asia' includes diverse nations like Japan, China, and India, with different languages and cultures, yet they are grouped together because of geographic proximity, which is scientifically problematic. For countries in the Global South, this presents an opportunity. Instead of inheriting government-defined racial categories, which may reflect bureaucratic convenience rather than sociocultural reality, researchers can redefine diversity in ways that better reflect lived experience. This may require immersive, interpretive work: entering communities, drawing from anthropology, and understanding how people themselves articulate differences and identities.

If researchers can develop racial categorizations grounded in empirical, context-specific realities rather than administrative labels, they will collect data that are scientifically richer and more valid. In fact, you will likely find that these locally grounded categories reveal stronger and more meaningful effects than those defined by government institutions.

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Your recent studies have indicated a shift from viewing diversity as just a compositional variable to considering it as part of organizational structure and dynamics. Could you explain why this multilevel perspective is essential and what the main obstacles, both theoretical and practical, are to achieving this alignment in organizations? Where are the most significant holes in our understanding of how these factors interact? (Humberto Reis, Pedro Jaime, and Renata Andreoni)

Orlando Richard: Conceptually, the idea of looking at diversity through a broad, systems-based lens is not new. Taylor Cox's work in the early 1990s already highlighted the need to integrate multiple organizational elements (strategy, structure, size, culture, demographics, and environmental context) into a single framework (Cox & Blake, 1991). The challenge is that, empirically, very few, if any, scholars have been able to study diversity accounting for all these levels simultaneously.

Collecting multilevel data on sensitive topics such as racial composition, diversity climate, organizational culture, and policy systems within the same study is extremely difficult. Early in my career, I tried to advance more holistic perspectives in some of my conceptual papers (Richard & Kirby, 1997, 1999), in hopes that it would motivate empirical work. The fact is that most of us had to study diversity piece by piece: one paper examining strategy interactions, another the external environment, another culture or HR systems. Over time, you build the broader model, but only one publication at a time.

One of the major holes in our understanding, for me, relates to DEI systems. Much of the literature adopts an either/or approach: either identity-conscious systems (initiatives aimed at expanding opportunities for underrepresented groups) or identity-blind, merit-based systems. But this polarized framing is not helpful. I recently argued that diversity and merit are not mutually exclusive (Konrad et al., 2021). You can expand the applicant pool to include individuals from different racial backgrounds and still maintain rigorous merit-based evaluation focused on knowledge, skills, and abilities.

An ambidextrous HR system combining opportunity-expanding practices with merit principles may be more effective, reducing backlash and reverse discrimination claims from majority subgroups while giving underrepresented groups real advancement opportunities. While conceptually appealing, we lack empirical knowledge on designing, implementing, and operating such systems across organizational levels.

Another issue is the gap between meritocracy rhetoric and the ongoing realities of discrimination. In today's U.S. climate, many organizations adopt colorblind strategies that deliberately avoid talking about race or gender. However, ignoring race does not eliminate the deep-rooted historical and structural inequalities (e.g., Jim Crow in the U.S., Apartheid in South Africa) that continue to influence workplace experiences. A discourse focused solely on merit, without recognizing persistent discrimination, remains incomplete and can be misleading.

So, we need multilevel research that captures organizational structures, policies, climates, and historical legacies simultaneously. The theory is already there; the empirical work is the missing piece. To move forward, we must pursue ways, methodological, institutional, or collaborative methods to collect data that reflect the full complexity of how diversity operates across organizational systems.

The future research agenda we've identified highlights the need to explore the problematic side of diversity, intersectionality, and non-financial metrics. If you could identify the three most urgent research questions for the next generation of scholars to address, what would they be and why? (Humberto Reis, Pedro Jaime, and Renata Andreoni)

Orlando Richard: Well, I do feel, and I agree with you, that intersectionality is one of the most urgent and promising directions. We're finally seeing some papers on this topic make their way into top management journals. For a long time, Crenshaw's (2013) work was influential in law and other disciplines, but it hadn't really penetrated the management field until very recently. So, I'm excited about this shift, and I think the next generation of scholars can really build on that momentum.

I can give you an example from my own work: I just published my first paper on intersectionality, looking at Black women's experiences with natural hair and how workplace microaggressions shape their daily experiences at work (Makapela et al., 2025). This paper is coming out in the *Journal of Applied Psychology*, and that's notable because management researchers interested in these issues previously had to publish in social psychology or other adjacent fields. I see intersectionality as a major area for management research: How do intersecting identities (e.g., race, gender, class) create unique workplace experiences that are not captured when we study these categories in isolation? Black women do not have the same workplace experiences as white women or Black men, and we must document and theorize around these differences.

The second area I see as urgent relates to what sociology calls mega-threats. These are major societal events, like the murder of George Floyd, or the rise of movements such as Black Lives Matter or #MeToo movement, that profoundly give life to how individuals experience identity and discrimination at work. During the pandemic, for example, I had a colleague from Asia who studied how terms like 'kung flu', used by political leaders, created a surge in microaggressions and fear among Asian employees. This triggered the Stop Asian Hate movement. These macro-level events have huge psychological and behavioral effects in organizations, yet we don't fully understand how they trickle down. So, the second critical question is: How do mega-threats and other macro-level societal events shape employees' experiences, identity expressions, and well-being at work?

And a third direction concerns the non-financial consequences of diversity, which you mentioned in your question, things like well-being, psychological safety, justice, and belonging. For decades, diversity research has centered on financial performance: does diversity help or hurt the bottom line? But that limited focus misses the full picture. Employees are experiencing real harm (microaggressions, exclusion, identity threats), and these outcomes matter even if they never show up on a balance sheet. So, I would say the third urgent question is: How can we systematically study the non-financial outcomes of diversity (well-being, dignity, social justice) and develop frameworks that treat these outcomes as central, not secondary?

Finally, what advice would you give to future researchers, especially those early in their careers who want to contribute to this field? (Humberto Reis, Pedro Jaime, and Renata Andreoni)

Orlando Richard: I would say that one of the most important competencies for early-career researchers in this field is developing a deep understanding of what is happening in the specific contexts they study. Diversity dynamics are local; they are embedded in history, culture, and politics. So, if you want to produce impactful work, you need to be genuinely grounded in the communities, organizations, and lived realities you are analyzing.

Methodologically, I think mixed methods offer enormous value here. Combining qualitative and quantitative approaches allows you to capture both nuance and generalizability, especially in a domain as complex and sensitive as diversity. One big mistake a young scholar can make is to stay confined to their training method. Engaging only with similar researchers misses chances to enrich their work.

When you interact across methodological traditions, reading their work, inviting them into your projects, and brainstorming together, you start to see phenomena from multiple angles. Even in my doctoral seminars, I make a point of assigning qualitative papers outside my training that are published in top journals, because students need to see what excellent qualitative work looks like in our field. Moreover, if they want to learn more, we have people in-house they can go to. If you do not have that in your own department, look outside and find those collaborators elsewhere.

Another piece of advice concerns positioning. Right now, the climate around DEI is politically charged. You may submit a manuscript to a journal and have reviewers who fully understand the importance of these issues, but you may also encounter reviewers who are skeptical or even hostile to DEI topics. So, one key competency is learning how to frame your work in a way that makes a clear theoretical contribution. Your paper can't rely solely on the importance of social problems. You need to show how your work extends, refines, or challenges existing theory, how it adds boundary conditions or opens new mechanisms. That framing strengthens the manuscript intellectually and protects it in a peer-review environment that can be unpredictable.

In sum, my advice is: Ground yourself deeply in context. Don't study diversity from a distance; embed yourself. Build methodological range and collaborations. Don't let your doctoral training become a cage. Learn to frame your work theoretically. Don't assume reviewers will buy into the DEI agenda but show them how the work advances management theory. If early-career scholars can do those three things, I think they'll be well positioned to make a real impact in this field.

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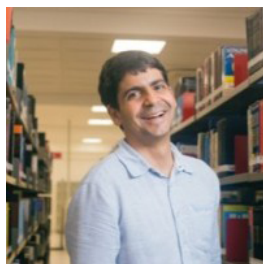### Interviewee

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