

## Engaging Differences

# Engaging Differences: How Socially Diverse Organizations Can Mobilize Their Resources More Effectively

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Diversity is a goal for many organizations, yet it is not always connected to improved performance. This study advances diversity-performance research by examining the effect of engaging social differences. The analysis uses data from a national study of organizations containing information on the race, gender, class, and religion of each organization's leaders as well as information on the type and content of interactions occurring among them. The data also contain multiple measures of organizational output, specifically the organization's performance in forming alliances, developing strategies, organizing constituents, and mobilizing people. The analysis focuses on organizations with a diverse leadership team, examining the teams' social interactions to assess whether engaging members' social differences is associated with better performance. Additionally, qualitative data illustrate how engaging social differences impacts organizational outcomes. The study finds that teams whose members regularly participate in bridging cultural activities and discuss their social differences achieve greater output. Overall, this study indicates that an organization's ability to realize the performance benefits of having a diverse leadership team is related to how the leaders interact with each other. The findings suggest that diverse organizations can improve their performance by ensuring that their members interact in ways that engage their social differences.

**Keywords:** organizations, leadership teams, diversity, social differences, social interaction, resource mobilization, performance

Many organizations aspire to be socially diverse, but greater diversity does not necessarily yield better performance. How an organization can leverage its social differences to improve performance remains an open question. Extensive research has examined whether diversity hinders or improves performance, yet the aggregated results are inconclusive.<sup>1</sup> Most of these studies analyze diversity as a continuous variable, and they examine associations between an organization's level of diversity and its performance. This study takes a

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different approach; instead of asking whether diversity hinders or improves an organization's performance, this study focuses on diverse organizations and seeks to identify internal dynamics associated with better performance. Specifically, this study analyzes community organizing organizations with a diverse leadership team and examines the teams' social interactions to assess whether teams that engage members' social differences perform better. The analysis uses original survey data from a national study of community organizing organizations containing information on the race, gender, class, and religion of each organization's leadership team members, as well as information on the type and content of their interactions. Additionally, qualitative data from 16 organizations provide examples of how engaging social differences can improve organizational output.

Because a disproportionately low number of leadership teams within many organizational fields lacks substantial social diversity (Gillis 2017), this study analyzes community organizing organizations because a large proportion of their leadership teams are diverse along several dimensions (Baggetta and Fulton 2019). In addition, while previous quantitative research has examined how the frequency of team members' interactions is related to organizational outcomes, this study is among the first to also examine the type and content of interaction. Because this study analyzes relationships between an organization's internal dynamics and its performance, it assesses multiple measures of organizational output: an organization's performance in forming alliances, developing strategies, organizing constituents, and mobilizing people. The analysis finds that among organizations with a diverse leadership team, greater output is associated with organizations whose leaders regularly engage their social differences by (1) participating in cultural activities that bridge social differences (here termed "bridging cultural activities") and (2) talking explicitly about their social differences. Overall, the results indicate that an organization's ability to realize the performance benefits of having a diverse leadership team is related to how the leaders interact with each other. The findings suggest that an organization with a diverse leadership team can improve its performance by ensuring that its leaders interact in ways that engage their social differences.

## Accessing and Mobilizing Social Resources

Social resource theory, which identifies mechanisms for accessing and mobilizing social resources, provides a helpful framework for understanding how the internal dynamics of a diverse organization are related to its performance (Lin 2001). Social resources are the influence, information, and experience people bring to an organization. The range of social resources that an organization can access is related to its level of social diversity (Fulton 2020), and organizations that have access to a greater variety of resources are likely to perform better (Lin 2001).

Organizations that are more diverse tend to have ties to a broader range of influential people and institutions, which can increase an organization's

capacity to form alliances and mobilize people (Gazley, Chang, and Bingham 2010; Reagans, Zuckerman, and McEvily 2004). Similarly, having nonredundant sources of information increases the variety of ideas generated within an organization, which can promote creativity and lead to innovation (Burt 2004). Furthermore, because demographic differences are often associated with different life experiences, social diversity can provide alternative perspectives and practices that can increase an organization's capacity to organize constituents and develop effective strategies (Ganz 2000; Hillman, Cannella, and Harris 2002).

Because socially diverse organizations have access to a wide variety of social resources, and because social resources can enhance organizational performance, an organization's level of diversity is expected to be positively associated with its output. However, research indicates that the relationship between diversity and performance is not always positive (see footnote #1). These mixed findings suggest that merely having access to social resources is insufficient for an organization to realize their benefits. An organization's ability to leverage its social differences to increase output may depend partly on its ability to mobilize the greater variety of social resources that diversity provides.

Network theory claims that while social diversity provides *access* to a broad range of social resources, social interaction facilitates such organizations' ability to *mobilize* those resources (Reagans, Zuckerman, and McEvily 2004). Burt (2004) demonstrates how networks that span structural holes are effective at generating innovative ideas, but not necessarily at implementing them. Meanwhile, Granovetter (2005) demonstrates how densely connected networks are effective at implementing innovative ideas, but not necessarily at generating them. Tortoriello and Krackhardt (2010) differentiate between bridging ties that facilitate idea generation and strong ties that facilitate idea implementation. Similarly, Vedres and Stark (2010) use the concept of structural folds (i.e., distinct network positions in which cohesive group structures overlap and interpenetrate) to argue that intercohesion (i.e., intense interaction and deep familiarity among members of a diverse organization) is necessary for experiencing the benefits of diversity. This interpenetrating engagement and cultivated familiarity among intersecting groups generates the mechanisms needed to recognize and effectively mobilize diverse resources.

Although social diversity endows an organization with a variety of social resources, realizing the benefits of those resources depends on the organization's ability to identify and incorporate them into its activities (Newell, Tensley, and Huang 2004; Reagans, Miron-Spektor, and Argote 2016). Maznevski's (1994) conceptual model suggests that certain interaction norms, such as prioritizing equal participation and cooperative (rather than competitive) goals, can facilitate the integration of members' differences and help ensure that their differences are elicited and understood. Building on this model, scholars claim that meeting this objective involves members interacting in ways that promote collective learning (e.g., via group projects and perspective taking exercises) (Ayas and Zeniuk 2001; Boland and Tenkasi 1995) and facilitate sharing novel or deviant perspectives (e.g., by encouraging dissenting opinions and opposing views) (DeDreu and

West 2001; Nemeth and Kwan 1987). Research suggests that when people from diverse backgrounds share their different perspectives, idea generation and implementation improve (Tortoriello and Krackhardt 2010), and it increases the organization's absorptive capacity—its ability to value, assimilate, and apply new ideas (Burt 2004; Cohen and Levinthal 1990).

## Engaging Social Differences

Socially diverse organizations, however, vary in the extent to which their members engage their social differences (Chatman et al. 1998). Some organizations have norms that discourage members from focusing on their social differences, while other organizations actively encourage such engagement (Foldy and Buckley 2014). Both the type and content of interaction among members of diverse organizations can indicate the degree to which members engage their differences. Certain types of interaction can foster engagement across lines of difference. For example, members of a diverse organization are likely to engage their social differences when they participate in bridging cultural activities (Bernstein 2005; Braunstein, Fulton, and Wood 2014; McNeill 1995). Such activities (e.g., playing games, sharing meals, dancing, and singing songs) exist in all cultures, but take on different, culturally specific forms. When members of a diverse organization participate in these types of activities, sharing these varied forms of familiar activities can simultaneously highlight members' commonalities and affirm their differences (Gawerc 2012). As a result, participating in bridging cultural activities can help forge a shared group identity while promoting social differences (Yukich, Fulton, and Wood 2020).

For example, research on social movement organizations indicates that singing songs together is a common way to build solidarity while engaging differences (Danaher 2010; Paretskaya 2015; Roy 2010). Determining which songs to sing at a particular event often involves members discussing the meaning and significance of the songs under consideration (Paretskaya 2015). Among socially diverse organizations, both these discussions and the act of singing the chosen songs together are likely to serve as forms of engaging the social differences connected to different song traditions (Yukich 2013). Rather than producing sameness, such activities organize differences in ways that highlight their value (Ghaziani and Baldassarri 2011). Thus, when members of a diverse organization participate in the bridging cultural activity of singing, they are likely to become exposed to and develop a deeper understanding of each other's cultural traditions. Interactions of this type, in which members engage their social differences, can facilitate an organization's capacity to mobilize its members' diverse social resources (Fulton and Wood 2017).

Similarly, the content of interaction among an organization's members can be related to the organization's capacity to mobilize resources (Marsden and Campbell 1984). Research suggests that a diverse organization can increase the likelihood that its members' varied social resources will be identified and considered when making organizational decisions by ensuring that its members regularly discuss their social differences (DeDreu and West 2001). Specifically,

scholars claim that cross-talk (i.e., discussions between socially dissimilar people) that focuses on the dimension(s) of dissimilarity can play a significant role in helping a diverse organization mobilize its social resources (Koch-Gonzalez, Ladd, and Yeskel 2009; Weare, Musso, and Jun 2009). For example, a team that has discussed the implications of income differences among its members might take those differences into consideration when deciding where to hold an event and whether to provide childcare. By talking explicitly about their social differences, members can deepen their understanding of one another, learn about issues from different perspectives, and be exposed to alternative approaches to addressing those issues (Foldy and Buckley 2014; Nemeth and Kwan 1987; Ospina and Foldy 2010). Furthermore, such discussions can cultivate an openness among members to engage novel ideas others propose and to consider implementing unfamiliar or previously undervalued strategies (Koch-Gonzalez, Ladd, and Yeskel 2009; Sue 2015).

When a group engages social differences and interacts reflectively and self-critically about their relations with each other and the wider social world, it is practicing social reflexivity (Lichterman 2005). By interacting intentionally and reflexively about social differences, a diverse team can enhance its ability to recognize and incorporate its varied resources. Given the relationship between engaging differences and mobilizing social resources, it is expected that among organizations with a diverse leadership team, those whose members regularly participate in bridging cultural activities and discuss their social differences will achieve greater output.

## Multiple Measures of Organizational Output

Many diversity-performance studies rely on a single output measure, even though organizational performance is a multidimensional concept (Combs et al. 2005). Studies that reduce performance to a single measure ignore the fact that organizations have multiple outputs that contribute to their overall performance (Sowa, Selden, and Sandfort 2004). Furthermore, relying on only one output measure precludes analyses from assessing how the relationship between engaging social differences and performance might vary depending on the type of output being measured (Pallotti and Lomi 2011). To assess the relationship between engaging social differences and performance among organizations with a diverse leadership team, this study analyzes multiple measures of organizational output: an organization's performance in forming alliances; developing strategies; organizing constituents; and mobilizing people (Davis et al. 2005).

## Forming Alliances

Nonprofit organizations often rely on individual and institutional allies who will support their activities, and an organization's linkage capacity represents the range of individuals and institutions with whom it can form alliances (Baum and Oliver 1991; Gazley and Brudney 2007). Because nonprofit organizations

typically access potential allies through their leaders' personal networks, organizations with a diverse leadership team tend to have greater linkage capacity as such teams often have a broader network of potential allies (Gazley, Chang, and Bingham 2010; Walker and McCarthy 2010). However, merely having access to a broader network of potential allies does not necessarily ensure that such alliances are forged (Rusch 2010). A diverse leadership team's likelihood of forming alliances with its broad range of potential allies may depend partly on the extent to which the team members engage their social differences. Specifically, when members of a diverse team regularly participate in bridging cultural activities and discuss their social differences, this engagement can facilitate their efforts to form a broad base of alliances (Foldy and Buckley 2014). Such interaction can build trust and understanding among an organization's leaders, which can increase the range of potential allies that they are willing to engage (Ospina and Foldy 2010). Thus, among organizations with a diverse leadership team, a positive relationship is expected between members engaging their social differences and the organization forming alliances.

## Developing Strategies

Strategies are the means by which an organization mobilizes resources to achieve its goals (Walker and McCarthy 2010). One way that people can develop strategies is to draw from their life experiences, which shape the way they frame issues, see political opportunities, and mobilize resources (Ganz 2000). Because people with different backgrounds develop different strategies, organizations with greater social diversity have access to a broader array of strategies. For example, people possess tactical repertoires (i.e., arsenals of tactics developed from their skills and experiences) that enable them to accomplish goals using different methods in different settings, and a socially diverse organization has access to a more expansive repertoire of tactics (Wang and Soule 2012). As with potential alliances, however, among many organizations with a diverse leadership team, merely having access to a variety of strategies is insufficient to ensure that they will be incorporated into the organization's activities (Newell, Tensley, and Huang 2004). A diverse leadership team's likelihood of drawing on its full range of available strategies may depend partly on the extent to which the team members engage their social differences. Such interactions can help organizational leaders to encounter different perspectives and consider alternative approaches, which can make the organization more open to adopting new strategies (Foldy and Buckley 2014; Ganz 2000). Thus, among organizations with a diverse leadership team, a positive relationship is expected between members engaging their social differences and the organization developing a wide array of strategies.

## Organizing Constituents and Mobilizing People

Grassroots organizations demonstrate durability through their ability to organize constituents and power through their ability to mobilize people (Han 2014).

An organization's organizing and mobilizing capacities correspond respectively to the constituencies it can organize and the people it can assemble to address particular issues. Organizations often organize constituents and mobilize people from their leaders' personal networks, and because overlapping networks can limit an organization's overall organizing and mobilizing capacities, organizations with a diverse leadership team have a broader scope of people from which to organize and mobilize (Tindall, Cormier, and Diani 2012). However, this resource can also remain underutilized; merely having a diverse recruiting base does not guarantee that an organization will organize a large number of volunteers or achieve a large turnout (Walker and Stepick 2014). With respect to organizing and mobilizing outcomes, again, the performance of such organizations may depend partly on the extent to which its leaders engage their social differences (Dumas, Phillips, and Rothbard 2013). For example, the organizing and mobilizing efforts of a diverse organization could be enhanced if its leaders discussed how their social differences might influence people's willingness to become involved and attend its events (Hart 2001; Lichterman 1995). The process of intentionally and collaboratively designing activities that appeal to the organization's broad base of constituents could increase both the leaders' motivation to recruit people from their respective communities and the likelihood of those people participating (Yukich 2013). Thus, among organizations with a diverse leadership team, a positive relationship is expected between members engaging their social differences and the organization's ability to organize and mobilize participants.

## Method

To examine whether the performance of an organization with a diverse leadership team is associated with its members engaging their social differences, this study analyzes data from the National Study of Community Organizing Organizations (NSCOO) (Fulton, Wood, and Funders 2011).<sup>2</sup> The organizations in this study are located throughout the country and share a similar structure and mission. They operate as community-based organizations that bring together individuals from their member institutions to address social, economic, and political issues that affect poor, low-income, and middle-class sectors of US society (Wood, Fulton, and Partridge 2012). Similar to social movement organizations, these organizations mobilize constituents to address issues through the public exercise of political power (Doussard and Fulton 2020; Tarrow 1994), and similar to civic organizations, their most common forms of public engagement are collective civic actions (Sampson et al. 2005). Each organization has a team of volunteer leaders consisting of representatives from its member institutions, which include religious congregations, nonprofit organizations, schools, unions, and other civic associations. Because most of the organizations have few paid staff, this team functions as the organization's core leadership team and its members meet together on a regular basis to lead the organization. Although all of these organizations engage in social justice work, they differ

in how they approach social differences. Consequently, this sample enables the analyses to hold the organizations' form relatively constant while allowing their social composition, internal dynamics, and organizational outputs to vary.

The NSCOO surveyed the entire field of these organizations by distributing a two-part survey to the director of each organization. Part one was an online survey that gathered extensive data on each organization's history, interactions, and activities. Part two consisted of customized spreadsheets that directors used to provide detailed demographic information about their institutional members, leadership team members, and paid staff. This multilevel study achieved a response rate of 94 percent—gathering data on 178 of the 189 organizations in the United States and demographic information on the 4,145 member institutions, 2,939 leadership team members, and 628 paid staff affiliated with these organizations (Fulton 2018).

The survey data are supplemented with qualitative data collected from 16 community organizing organizations with a diverse leadership team. These organizations are located in California, Florida, Illinois, Indiana, Minnesota, Nevada, New York, North Carolina, and Ohio, and they vary in size, social composition, internal dynamics, and organizational outcomes. The data contain ethnographic observations of 52 organization-wide meetings, which were evenly distributed across the organizations and involved discussions on topics including forming alliances, developing organizing strategies, recruiting new members, and planning large-scale events. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with the directors of 12 organizations. The interview questions focused on the organizations' history, internal dynamics, and organizational practices. Additional data were collected through over 80 informal conversations and correspondence with the organizations' directors, leadership team members, and paid staff. The observational data and individual accounts of the organizations' activities and dynamics are used to help explain the findings generated from the quantitative analysis.

### ***Measures of Social Diversity***

The quantitative analysis measures the diversity of an organization's leadership team by tabulating the race, gender, household income level, and religious affiliation of its members. The racial diversity of an organization's leadership team is calculated using the Index of Qualitative Variation (IQV), which takes into account both the number of racial groups and the proportion of each group represented on the team to generate a diversity score that ranges from 0 to 1. The IQV is similarly applied to calculate the gender and religious diversity of an organization's leadership team.<sup>3</sup> Using the IQV to calculate the income level diversity of an organization's leadership team is inappropriate because the "groups" represented in the leaders' household income variable have an inherent ordering (Reardon 2009). Therefore, the analysis uses the Gini coefficient to calculate the leadership teams' income level diversity.



## **Measures of Engaging Social Differences**

The main analysis examines the extent to which the members of an organization's leadership team engage their social differences. Specifically, it examines how often the members participate in bridging cultural activities and how often they discuss their social differences. To measure how often the leaders participate in bridging cultural activities, the analysis uses responses from the following survey item. Directors were asked to indicate how often their organization's activities included members singing songs together over the past year (for instance, at a protest, prayer vigil, or training event). This ordered categorical variable has five response options (never, rarely, sometimes, often, and always), which the analysis converted to Likert-type values ranging from 1 to 5. To measure how often the members of the leadership team discuss their social differences, the analysis uses responses from a survey item in which directors were asked to indicate how often their organization explicitly discussed racial differences in their meetings over the past year. Like the singing item, this ordered categorical variable has five response options (never, rarely, sometimes, often, and always) in which the analysis converted to Likert-type values ranging from 1 to 5. Directors were also asked identically constructed questions related to discussing gender, class, and religious differences.

One limitation of the NSCOO dataset is that it does not contain measures for individual-level interaction between an organization's leadership team members. The level of involvement among an organization's leaders can vary substantially; thus, in order to achieve a more accurate picture of leadership team interaction, the analysis restricts the sample of leadership team members to those who attended at least half of their organization's leadership team meetings in the previous 12 months.<sup>4</sup> On average, 81 percent of an organization's leadership team members met this criterion. These regularly attending leaders are more likely to interact with each other, and they also provide a more accurate measure of the leadership team's functional level of diversity, because the level of diversity represented by the leaders who regularly attend the organization's leadership team meetings tends to be less than the level of diversity indicated by the organization's full roster of leadership team members.

Because this study is interested primarily in examining whether the performance of an organization with a diverse leadership team is associated with its members engaging their social differences, the main analysis also restricts the sample to the organizations with a leadership team that is sufficiently diverse. Kanter's (1977) "tipping point" criterion is used to determine whether an organization's leadership team is sufficiently diverse along a particular social dimension (i.e., at least two groups need to each represent at least 20 percent of the team). Using only the regularly attending members as defined above, an organization's leadership team is defined as racially diverse if two racial groups each represent at least 20 percent of the team; 68 percent of the surveyed organizations have a leadership team that meets this criterion. An organization's leadership team is defined as gender diverse if males and females each represent at least 20 percent of the team (93 percent of the organizations met this criterion).

An organization's leadership team is defined as income diverse if at least 20 percent of its members earn less than \$50,000 per year (77 percent of surveyed organizations), and an organization's leadership team is defined as religiously diverse if at least three different major religious traditions are represented on the team (78 percent of the organizations).<sup>5</sup>

### **Measures of Organizational Output**

To examine whether the performance of an organization with a diverse leadership team is associated with its members engaging their social differences, this study analyzes multiple measures of organizational output: an organization's performance in forming alliances, developing strategies, and mobilizing people. The analysis uses two dependent variables related to an organization forming alliances. *Number of city officials* indicates the number of different city officials the organization had met with in the past year. Although such meetings do not always result in alliances, they do offer the potential to form them.<sup>6</sup> *Number of multiorganizational collaborations* indicates the number of multiorganizational collaborations of which the organization is a member. In conjunction with these survey items, respondents were asked to provide the full names of the political officials and multiorganizational collaborations.

The analysis uses two dependent variables related to an organization developing a broad array of strategies. *Number of organizing tactics* indicates the number of different organizing tactics the organization used in the past 2 years to address socio-political issues. Respondents could select up to nine different tactics: boycotts, leafleting, mass letter-writing, prayer vigils, press conferences, accountability sessions, rallies, sit-ins, and strikes as well as two open-ended response options. *Number of modes used for mass communication* indicates the number of different modes of communication the organization used in the past year to communicate simultaneously with many of its constituents. Respondents could select up to 11 different modes: bulk mail, robocalling, email listservs, Facebook, Evite, YouTube, Twitter, podcasts, online photo albums, blogs, and websites.

The analysis uses two dependent variables related to an organization's ability to organize and mobilize people. *Number of volunteers* indicates the number of people who regularly attend planning meetings or work on the organization's projects. *Total turnout* indicates the total number of people who attended at least one of the organization's events in the past year.

The analysis uses a final set of dependent variables to examine the relationship between a leadership team discussing their social differences and the effect those differences have on organizational dynamics. To measure the impact of racial differences, directors were asked to indicate the extent to which racial differences had enhanced their planning meetings over the past year. This ordered categorical variable has five response options (not at all, minimally, a little, somewhat, and a lot), which the analysis converted to Likert-type values ranging from 1 to 5. Directors were also asked identically constructed questions related to gender, class, and religious differences.

The analyses control for the organization's annual revenue and age; the number of its paid staff, member institutions, and leaders; the number of leadership team meetings the organization held in the previous year; and the racial and religious diversity of the organization's county. Each of these characteristics is known to be associated with the output measures and independent variables of interest. Table 1 displays descriptive statistics for the variables used in the analysis.

## Results and Discussion

A preliminary analysis assesses how well social diversity alone explains performance. Using four dimensions of social difference of an organization's leadership team as independent variables, the analysis examines their associations with performance by running generalized linear regression models for each of the dependent variables. Table 2 displays the results of these models.<sup>7</sup> The analysis indicates that the racial diversity of an organization's leadership team is related to meeting with a greater number of city officials and using a greater number of tactics, but not related to the other four output measures. The gender diversity of the organization's leadership team is related to meeting with fewer city officials, having fewer multiorganizational collaborations, and using fewer organizing tactics and fewer modes of mass communication. Gender diversity is not significantly related to the other two output measures. Income diversity is positively related to meetings with city officials, multiorganizational collaborations, and organizing tactics, and negatively related to the total turnout at organizational events. Finally, religious diversity is positively related to the number of mass communication modes and negatively related to total turnout. Overall, no consistent relationship is observed between the diversity of an organization's leadership team and the measures of organizational output. This lack of consistent associations between diversity and performance is consistent with meta-analytic investigations examining diversity-performance relationships.

It remains unclear why there is not a more consistent positive relationship between the diversity of an organization's leadership team and its performance in forming alliances, developing strategies, organizing constituents, and mobilizing people, as these activities should be facilitated by a diverse organization's access to a wide range of social resources. As discussed with regard to network theory, one possible explanation is that merely having *access* to a greater variety of social resources is insufficient for an organization to realize the performance benefits of having a diverse leadership team. Realizing the benefits requires that those resources be *mobilized*, and research indicates that dynamics within such teams can affect an organization's ability to mobilize its social resources.

Accordingly, the main analysis examines the internal dynamics of organizations with a diverse leadership team and assesses whether the organization's performance is related to the extent to which its team members engage their social differences. Specifically, the analysis examines whether an organization's performance in forming alliances, developing strategies, organizing constituents,

**Table 1. Descriptive Statistics for the Community Organizing Organizations and Their Leadership Teams**

| Variable   | Mean | SD  | Min. | Max. | N   |
|--|------|-----|------|------|-----|
| <i>Measures of Social Diversity<sup>a</sup></i>              |      |     |      |      |     |
| Racial diversity of the organization's leadership team       | .56  | .24 | .00  | .97  | 160 |
| Proportion Caucasian   | .51  | .27 | .00  | 1.00 | 160 |
| Proportion African American                                  | .29  | .28 | .00  | 1.00 | 160 |
| Proportion Latinx  | .16  | .22 | .00  | 1.00 | 160 |
| Proportion other   | .04  | .08 | .00  | .58  | 160 |
| Gender diversity of the organization's leadership team       | .88  | .16 | .00  | 1.00 | 160 |
| Proportion female  | .51  | .18 | .00  | .89  | 160 |
| Income level diversity of the organization's leadership team | .19  | .07 | .00  | .33  | 149 |
| Proportion that earns less than \$25,000 per year            | .22  | .21 | .00  | 1.00 | 149 |
| Proportion that earns \$25,000–\$49,999 per year             | .36  | .19 | .00  | 1.00 | 149 |
| Proportion that earns \$50,000–\$74,999 per year             | .25  | .18 | .00  | .90  | 149 |
| Proportion that earns \$75,000–\$100,00 per year             | .12  | .15 | .00  | .93  | 149 |
| Proportion that earns more than \$100,000 per year           | .05  | .10 | .00  | .67  | 149 |
| Religious diversity of the organization's leadership team    | .66  | .19 | .00  | .91  | 160 |
| Proportion Catholic  | .35  | .23 | .00  | 1.00 | 160 |
| Proportion mainline Protestant                               | .30  | .21 | .00  | .81  | 160 |
| Proportion black Protestant                                  | .21  | .24 | .00  | 1.00 | 160 |
| Proportion conservative Protestant                           | .06  | .09 | .00  | .38  | 160 |
| Proportion Jewish  | .04  | .08 | .00  | .33  | 160 |
| Proportion Muslim  | .01  | .03 | .00  | .18  | 160 |
| Proportion other   | .02  | .08 | .00  | .50  | 160 |

*Continued*

**Table 1. Continue**

| Variable   | Mean  | SD    | Min. | Max.  | N   |
|--|-------|-------|------|-------|-----|
| <i>Measures of Organizational Output</i>                             |       |       |      |       |     |
| Number of city officials the organization met with                   | 14.60 | 12.14 | .00  | 80.00 | 160 |
| Number of multiorganizational collaborations                         | 1.93  | 2.13  | .00  | 7.00  | 160 |
| Number of organizing tactics used by the organization                | 4.32  | 1.95  | .00  | 9.00  | 160 |
| Number of modes used for mass communication                          | 5.34  | 2.40  | .00  | 11.00 | 160 |
| Number of volunteers ( $\times 100$ )                                | 1.11  | .99   | .03  | 6.00  | 160 |
| Total turnout ( $\times 1,000$ )                                     | 1.25  | 1.47  | .00  | 11.86 | 160 |
| Extent racial differences enhanced planning meetings <sup>b</sup>    | 3.95  | 1.33  | 1.00 | 5.00  | 109 |
| Extent gender differences enhanced planning meetings <sup>b</sup>    | 2.80  | 1.59  | 1.00 | 5.00  | 149 |
| Extent class differences enhanced planning meetings <sup>b</sup>     | 3.28  | 1.45  | 1.00 | 5.00  | 115 |
| Extent religious differences enhanced planning meetings <sup>b</sup> | 3.40  | 1.45  | 1.00 | 5.00  | 126 |
| <i>Characteristics of the Organization</i>                           |       |       |      |       |     |
| Annual revenue ( $\times \$100,000$ )                                | 3.07  | 6.66  | .11  | 75.00 | 160 |
| Age of the organization  | 13.49 | 8.84  | 1.00 | 40.00 | 160 |
| Number of paid staff   | 2.93  | 2.69  | 1.00 | 19.00 | 160 |
| Number of member institutions  | 23.57 | 13.90 | 6.00 | 82.00 | 160 |
| Number of leadership team members <sup>a</sup>                       | 13.28 | 6.85  | 3.00 | 42.00 | 160 |
| Number of leadership team meetings in the past year                  | 20.68 | 9.07  | 2.00 | 64.00 | 160 |
| Racial diversity of the organization's county <sup>c</sup>           | .68   | .21   | .12  | .99   | 160 |
| Religious diversity of the organization's county <sup>d</sup>        | .76   | .10   | .44  | .90   | 160 |

**Source:** 2011 National Study of Community Organizing Organizations

<sup>a</sup>Based on the leadership team members who attended at least half of their organization's leadership team meetings.

<sup>b</sup>Statistics provided only for organizations with a leadership team that is racially, gender, income, or religiously, or religiously diverse respectively.

<sup>c</sup>Source: 2010 U.S. Census.

<sup>d</sup>Source: 2010 U.S. Religion Census.

**Table 2. Generalized Linear Models Estimating the Relationship between Social Diversity and Organizational Performance**

|  | <i>Forming alliances<sup>c</sup></i>               |  | <i>Developing strategies<sup>d</sup></i>              |   | <i>Organizing and mobilizing<sup>c</sup></i> |                   |
|--|--|--|---|---|--|-------------------|
|  | Number of city officials the organization met with | Number of multiorganizational collaborations | Number of organizing tactics used by the organization | Number of modes used for mass communication | Number of volunteers                         | Total turnout     |
| <i>Measures of social diversity</i>                    |  |  |   |   |  |                   |
| Racial diversity of leadership team <sup>a</sup>       | 1.638***<br>(.208)                                 | .881<br>(.175)                               | 1.194*<br>(.107)                                      | 1.016<br>(.089)                             | .874<br>(.107)                               | .950<br>(.173)    |
| Gender diversity of leadership team <sup>a</sup>       | .330***<br>(.075)                                  | .492**<br>(.129)                             | .692***<br>(.059)                                     | .691***<br>(.066)                           | 1.135<br>(.177)                              | 1.155<br>(.198)   |
| Income level diversity of leadership team <sup>a</sup> | 2.463*<br>(.946)                                   | 3.461*<br>(1.867)                            | 2.469***<br>(.621)                                    | .934<br>(.245)                              | .960<br>(.318)                               | .110***<br>(.047) |
| Religious diversity of leadership team <sup>a</sup>    | .940<br>(.135)                                     | 1.552<br>(.358)                              | 1.103<br>(.115)                                       | 1.429*<br>(.199)                            | 1.149<br>(.185)                              | .410**<br>(.116)  |
| <i>Characteristics of the organization</i>             |  |  |   |   |  |                   |
| Annual revenue <sup>b</sup>                            | 1.286***<br>(.060)                                 | 1.221**<br>(.080)                            | 1.011<br>(.026)                                       | 1.062*<br>(.027)                            | 1.033<br>(.049)                              | 1.188**<br>(.064) |

*Continued*

Table 2. Continue

|  | Forming alliances <sup>c</sup>                     |  | Developing strategies <sup>d</sup>                    |   | Organizing and mobilizing <sup>e</sup> |                    |
|--|--|--|---|---|--|--------------------|
|  | Number of city officials the organization met with | Number of multiorganizational collaborations | Number of organizing tactics used by the organization | Number of modes used for mass communication | Number of volunteers                   | Total turnout      |
| Age of the organization <sup>b</sup>             | .962<br>(.037)                                     | 1.093<br>(.072)                              | 1.076**<br>(.023)                                     | 1.033<br>(.021)                             | 1.145***<br>(.038)                     | 1.132**<br>(.043)  |
| Number of paid staff <sup>b</sup>                | 1.152*<br>(.072)                                   | 1.681***<br>(.155)                           | 1.229***<br>(.037)                                    | 1.260***<br>(.037)                          | 1.192**<br>(.061)                      | 1.370***<br>(.090) |
| Number of member institutions <sup>b</sup>       | 1.018<br>(.065)                                    | .740**<br>(.066)                             | .986<br>(.032)  | .956<br>(.034)                              | 1.323***<br>(.078)                     | 1.201*<br>(.087)   |
| Number of leadership team members <sup>a,b</sup> | 1.170*<br>(.084)                                   | .844<br>(.096)                               | .920<br>(.040)  | .987<br>(.043)                              | 1.708***<br>(.110)                     | 1.896***<br>(.136) |
| Racial diversity of the organization's county    | .533***<br>(.081)                                  | .485**<br>(.111)                             | .752**<br>(.079)                                      | .920<br>(.084)                              | 2.363***<br>(.359)                     | 2.012**<br>(.407)  |
| Religious diversity of the organization's county | .550<br>(.181)                                     | 6.836***<br>(3.077)                          | 1.961***<br>(.312)                                    | 1.654**<br>(.269)                           | .291***<br>(.084)                      | .300***<br>(.091)  |

**Note:** Linearized standard errors reported in parentheses; constants are not displayed;  $N = 149$ .

<sup>a</sup>Based on the leadership team members who attended at least half of their organization's leadership team meetings.

<sup>b</sup>Logged values.

<sup>c</sup>Incidence-rate ratios reported for negative binomial regressions.

<sup>d</sup>Incidence-rate ratios reported for right-censored Poisson regressions (Stata: *cpoisson*).

\*  $p < .05$ ; \*\*  $p < .01$ ; \*\*\*  $p < .001$  (two-tailed tests).

and mobilizing people is associated with how often its leadership team members participate in bridging cultural activities and discuss their social differences. Causal order cannot be determined because the analysis uses cross-sectional data; thus, the reporting of the results avoids using causal language. Generalized linear regression models were used for each of the dependent variables for each subsample of organizations with a leadership team whose racial, gender, income, and religious composition is sufficiently diverse. Table 3 displays the results of the six models for each of the four subsamples.

### ***Bridging Cultural Activities***

The analysis indicates that among organizations with a racially, gender-, income-, or religiously diverse leadership team, those whose team members regularly sing together tend to perform better in developing strategies, organizing constituents, and mobilizing people. For diverse organizations, singing together is associated with using a greater number of organizing tactics and modes of mass communication and with recruiting more volunteers and participants. The relationship between singing and forming alliances is more limited. Among organizations with a gender- or income-diverse leadership team, singing together is associated with participating in a greater number of multiorganizational collaborations.

Cultural bridging and brokerage theories suggest that the positive performance outcomes are due partly to members of a diverse leadership team encountering cultural differences in the context of familiar activities, such as singing together. Songs are deeply connected to culture and are often woven into broader occasions and customs. An organization's frequent practice of singing together may point to and reinforce its intercohesion. When practiced by an organization with a diverse leadership team, singing together may represent a willingness to incorporate multiple cultural traditions and practices. Such activities platform and celebrate social differences, rather than minimizing them, and can lead to greater understanding and appreciation of the differences represented among the organization's leaders. In this way, participating in bridging cultural activities may help members of a diverse leadership team to engage their differences and more effectively identify and mobilize the variety of social resources to which their members have access.

Qualitative data collected from organizations with a diverse leadership team illustrate how participating in bridging cultural activities can help team members recognize their social differences as assets and leverage them to improve their organization's performance. One organization organized a talent show held at local café to both raise money for the organization and showcase the talents of its members. The acts, which centered on the theme of people's experiences with the criminal justice system, included a spoken word performance, a violin solo, and a poetry reading. The diversity of genres, performers, and perspectives attracted a large number and wide variety of attendees. In addition to succeeding as a fundraiser, the talent show brought people together across lines of racial and class differences and provided opportunities for informal interaction. According to the organization's director, bridging cultural activities such as this event enhanced



**Table 3. Generalized Linear Models Estimating the Relationship between an Organization with a Diverse Leadership Team Engaging its Members' Social Differences and Its Performance in Forming Alliances, Developing Strategies, and Mobilizing People and the Extent Social Differences Enhance Planning Meetings<sup>a</sup>**

|  | <i>Forming alliances<sup>b</sup></i> |  | <i>Developing strategies<sup>c</sup></i>     |   | <i>Organizing and mobilizing<sup>b</sup></i> |                      |                 | Extent differences enhanced planning meetings <sup>d</sup> |
|--|--------------------------------------|--|--|---|--|----------------------|-----------------|--|
|  | Mean (SD)                            | Number of city officials the organization met with | Number of multiorganizational collaborations | Number of organizing tactics used by the organization | Number of modes used for mass communication  | Number of volunteers | Total turnout   |  |
| <i>Organizations with a Racially Diverse Leadership Team (N = 109)</i> |                                      |  |  |   |  |                      |                 | Racial differences   |
| How often activities include members singing together                  | 3.15 (.93)                           | .952 (.043)  | 1.129 (.087)                                 | 1.074* (.029)   | 1.077** (.028)                               | 1.196*** (.055)      | 1.145** (.054)  | .151 (.134)  |
| Frequency of discussing racial differences in meetings                 | 3.23 (.98)                           | 1.363*** (.061)                                    | 1.126* (.062)                                | 1.122*** (.029)                                       | 1.133*** (.026)                              | 1.051 (.054)         | 1.154** (.058)  | 1.183*** (.223)  |
| <i>Organizations with a Gender Diverse Leadership Team (N = 149)</i>   |                                      |  |  |   |  |                      |                 | Gender differences   |
| How often activities include members singing together                  | 2.98 (1.00)                          | .985 (.026)  | 1.144** (.048)                               | 1.081*** (.019)                                       | 1.093*** (.019)                              | 1.061* (.031)        | 1.296*** (.046) | .065 (.079)  |
| Frequency of discussing gender differences in meetings                 | 2.07 (.80)                           | 1.180*** (.039)                                    | 1.330*** (.068)                              | 1.135*** (.025)                                       | 1.083*** (.021)                              | 1.069* (.034)        | 1.097* (.042)   | 1.343*** (.124)  |

*Continued*

Table 3. Continue

|   | Forming alliances <sup>b</sup> |  | Developing strategies <sup>c</sup>           |   | Organizing and mobilizing <sup>b</sup>      |                           |                           | Extent differences enhanced planning meetings <sup>d</sup> |
|---|--------------------------------|--|--|---|---|---------------------------|---------------------------|--|
|   | Mean (SD)                      | Number of city officials the organization met with | Number of multiorganizational collaborations | Number of organizing tactics used by the organization | Number of modes used for mass communication | Number of volunteers      | Total turnout             |  |
| <i>Organizations with an Income Diverse Leadership Team (N = 115)</i>     |                                |  |  |   |   |                           |                           | Class differences  |
| How often activities include members singing together                     | 2.97 (1.00)                    | .871** (.041)                                      | 1.222** (.078)                               | 1.070** (.025)  | 1.108*** (.022)                             | 1.127** (.044)            | 1.085 <sup>†</sup> (.047) | .355* (.144)   |
| Frequency of discussing class differences in meetings                     | 2.96 (.94)                     | 1.179** (.061)                                     | 1.017 (.062)                                 | 1.040 (.026)  | 1.107*** (.024)                             | 1.070 (.044)              | 1.133** (.050)            | .945*** (.148)   |
| <i>Organizations with a Religiously Diverse Leadership Team (N = 126)</i> |                                |  |  |   |   |                           |                           | Religious differences                                      |
| How often activities include members singing together                     | 3.01 (.96)                     | .970 (.040)  | 1.108 <sup>†</sup> (.065)                    | 1.071** (.025)  | 1.083*** (.023)                             | 1.108* (.047)             | 1.200*** (.048)           | .157 (.095)  |
| Frequency of discussing religious differences in meetings                 | 2.79 (.88)                     | 1.088 <sup>†</sup> (.048)                          | 1.209** (.064)                               | 1.100*** (.028)                                       | 1.054* (.027)                               | 1.077 <sup>†</sup> (.044) | 1.108* (.051)             | 1.096*** (.157)  |

**Note:** Each model also includes the *Characteristics of the Organization* variables in Table 1 as controls; the coefficients for these variables are not displayed; linearized standard errors reported in parentheses.

<sup>a</sup>Based on the leadership team members who attended at least half of their organization's leadership team meetings.

<sup>b</sup>Incidence-rate ratios reported for negative binomial regressions.

<sup>c</sup>Incidence-rate ratios reported for right-censored Poisson regressions (Stata: *cpoisson*).

<sup>d</sup>Odds ratios reported for ordered logistic regressions.

<sup>†</sup> $p < .10$ ; \*  $p < .05$ ; \*\*  $p < .01$ ; \*\*\*  $p < .001$  (two-tailed tests).

the organization's efforts and the leaders' willingness to collaborate with a wide variety of organizations throughout their city. Another organization hosted a game night, which seemed to have a similar bridging effect. Although playing games was most likely a familiar activity for the organization's gender-diverse Asian, Caucasian, and Latinx members, the event provided an informal context for members to encounter each other's cultural differences via the types and styles of game play. The director noted that such activities helped the leaders to better understand and appreciate their varied approaches when developing strategies and making decisions as an organization.

In another example, one organization held a quarterly prayer meeting to provide members with an opportunity to collectively pray for the needs of their city. Each quarter a different institutional member hosted the meeting, and the style of the meeting often included distinct cultural elements of the host institution. When one member institution comprising primarily lower income participants hosted the prayer meeting, it organized a prayer walk in which participants were instructed to walk in pairs through the neighborhood and pray for the needs they observed. Although praying is a common practice for the members of this organization, many of the higher income members noted that they had neither participated in a prayer walk, nor had they walked the streets of this lower income neighborhood. The director indicated that experiences such as these helped to bridge the organization's class differences, build collective identity, and motivate members to become more involved.

### ***Discussing Social Differences***

Just as participating in bridging cultural activities is positively associated with the performance of an organization with a diverse leadership team, the analysis indicates that regularly discussing social differences is positively associated with an organization's performance in forming alliances, developing strategies, organizing constituents, and mobilizing people. Regarding an organization's performance in forming alliances, the analysis indicates that among organizations with a racially diverse leadership team, those that regularly discuss racial differences tend to meet with a greater number of city officials and participate in a greater number of multiorganizational collaborations. Similar patterns are observed among organizations with a gender-diverse, income-diverse, and religiously diverse leadership team that regularly discusses gender, class, and religious differences, respectively. These results suggest that when members of a diverse leadership team engage their social differences, members are more willing to utilize the variety of social resources to which the team has access.

Qualitative data collected from organizations with a diverse leadership team illustrate how regularly talking about members' social differences can facilitate an organization's efforts to form alliances. Although an organization with a diverse leadership team may have ties to a wide variety of political officials, some members may be less willing to approach or work with political officials who hold views that differ from their own. In one organization with an income-diverse leadership team, class differences were discussed extensively as the

organization deliberated over which city council members to target for support of the organization's economic development plan. The hourly wage earners and small business owners on the organization's leadership team had ties to different city council members who held differing views on approaches to economic development. Through the course of their discussions, the leadership team members crafted an economic development plan acceptable to both income groups, which included members initiating contact with a broadened base of city council members to gain their support. In another organization, which had a racially diverse leadership team, members discussed racial differences as they deliberated over whether to put their support behind a city council member's proposal to increase minority contracting. The discussions corresponded with the Caucasian leadership team members' willingness to support the proposal and meet with additional city council members to solicit their support as well. In another organization with a racially diverse (albeit majority Caucasian) leadership team, many of its discussions about racial differences were prompted by proposals to collaborate with predominantly African-American and Latinx organizations. Although at times the discussions were contested and heated, they often resulted in the hesitant Caucasian members becoming more open to trusting the insights and perspectives of the African-American and Latinx leadership team members who wanted to collaborate with the proposed organizations.

Regarding an organization's performance in developing strategies, the quantitative analysis indicates that among organizations with a gender-diverse leadership team, those that regularly discuss gender differences tend to use a greater number of organizing tactics and modes of mass communication. Similar patterns are observed among organizations with a racially diverse, income-diverse, and religiously diverse leadership team that regularly discusses racial, class, and religious differences, respectively. These results suggest that when members of a diverse leadership team regularly talk about their social differences, it can help them to identify and implement the wider range of strategies to which the team has access.

Again, the qualitative data provide relevant illustrations, demonstrating how regularly discussing social differences can expand an organization's tactical repertoire. In one organization with a racially diverse leadership team, efforts to develop tactical strategies often involved African-American members contributing strategies by describing the historical roots and effectiveness of civil rights-era tactics such as sit-ins and boycotts, and Caucasian members contributing by highlighting the benefits of relational approaches such as scheduling meetings with influential leaders. In another organization with an income-diverse leadership team, during a strategic planning meeting, lower income members described their experiences participating in labor strikes and higher income members described their experiences holding press conferences.<sup>8</sup> In a third organization, which had a religiously diverse leadership team that regularly discussed religious differences, members often cited the practices of their respective religious traditions when proposing tactics such as prayer vigils and rallies.

The qualitative data also illustrate how discussing differences can help an organization become more aware of social differences in preferred modes of

mass communication, which can lead the organization to adopt a wider variety of communication modes. In one case, a Latina leader in a majority Caucasian organization initiated discussions about the language and literacy challenges faced by some members of her community. These discussions contributed to the organization seeing the need to pursue using modes of mass communication that could easily transmit information in multiple languages—specifically a website with a built-in translator—as well as modes that did not require recipients to be literate—specifically a podcast, an online photo album, and robocalling. By talking about their differences, the leaders discovered limitations of their organization's current communication modes and generated ideas to address those limitations.

Regarding an organization's performance in organizing constituents and mobilizing people, the quantitative analysis indicates that among organizations with a religiously diverse leadership team, those that regularly discuss religious differences tend to organize a greater number of volunteers and mobilize more people to attend events. Similar patterns are observed among organizations with a racially diverse, gender-diverse, and income-diverse leadership team that regularly discusses racial, gender, and class differences, respectively. These results indicate that the organizing and mobilizing outcomes of an organization with a diverse leadership team are associated with how often the members talk about their social differences. This finding suggests that through regularly discussing their social differences, members of a diverse leadership team can cultivate an organizational culture and design events that will appeal to a broad base of participants.

As with forming alliances and developing strategies, the qualitative data also illustrate how regularly talking about members' social differences can improve organizing and mobilizing outcomes. In one organization with a gender-diverse leadership team, a single-parent member described the childcare challenges she faced when she tried to attend the organization's training events. Following this discussion, the organization brainstormed ways to address this challenge and decided to provide childcare during their training events. In another case, a racially diverse (albeit majority African-American) organization was organizing a potluck for its volunteers in conjunction with Black History Month, and the African-American organizers had planned to ask participants to bring an African dish to share. A Latina leader, however, challenged this aspect of the event. She explained that it might discourage her Latinx constituents from attending because they would feel uncomfortable preparing such a dish. This insight led the leadership team to discuss more broadly how they could organize events that celebrate particular racial/ethnic communities without alienating other communities in the process.

Similarly, the qualitative data illustrate how discussing social differences can help an organization's leaders become more sensitive to how characteristics of its large-scale public events might encourage or discourage participation. Such discussions can contribute to designing events that accommodate and appeal to a broad base of constituents. For example, during a discussion in an income-diverse organization, a lower income member asserted that the low turnout

occurred partly because the location of the event was not easily accessible by public transportation. This person explained that many of the people in her community do not own cars and thus rely on public transportation. Some of the higher income members acknowledged that public transportation routes were not a factor they considered when selecting a location for events. The ensuing discussion focused on how the organization could more effectively accommodate class differences when organizing events. In another organization with a religiously diverse leadership team that regularly discussed religious differences, a Muslim member contended that the organization's events tended to have a strong Christian ethos, which some members of his mosque found off-putting. He challenged the organization to adapt its events so that they incorporated the characteristics and values of the various faith traditions represented among the organization's constituents. The discussions that followed prompted the organization to be more intentional about taking into account the faith traditions of the main speakers, the texts cited, the types of food provided, and the dates of holy days when planning events, all of which helped the organization make its events more appealing to people with a religious affiliation other than Christian.

These examples illustrate how organizations with a diverse leadership team whose members talked about their social differences broadened their base of allies, expanded their repertoire of strategies, and/or increased the inclusiveness of their events. The qualitative data indicate that these types of cross-race, -gender, -class, and -religion discussions can expose limitations in organizational approaches and promote openness to alternative views, traditions, and practices that would otherwise remain unfamiliar and/or undervalued. Such cross-talk discussions contributed to the organizations adjusting their activities in ways that utilized their diverse social resources and facilitated their ability to form alliances, develop strategies, organize constituents, and mobilize people. Far from becoming divided over differences, the analysis indicates that by talking about their social differences, these organizations were able to foster internal and external collaborations that improved their performance.

The final analysis examines whether regularly talking about social differences is associated with enhancing an organization's planning process. In the first model of this analysis, an ordered logistic regression was conducted for the dependent variable indicating the extent to which directors of organizations with a racially diverse leadership team viewed racial differences as enhancing their planning meetings. The key independent variable for this model is how often the organization's leadership team discussed racial differences. Equivalent analyses were conducted for the subsets of organizations with a gender-, income-, and religiously diverse leadership team. The final column in [table 3](#) displays the results of the multivariate regressions for each of the four subsamples. The analysis indicates, for each social dimension, a positive relationship between the leadership team regularly talking about those social differences and the director indicating that those differences enhanced their planning meetings. These results provide additional evidence for the performance benefits of diverse leadership teams talking about their social differences.

A supplemental analysis of organizations with a diverse leadership team tests whether the social differences themselves are linked to enhanced planning meetings, independent of any discussions of those differences. The analysis examines the relationship between the leadership team's level of racial diversity and the extent to which the director viewed racial differences as enhancing their planning meetings. Equivalent analyses were conducted for the subsets of organizations with a gender-, income-, and religiously diverse leadership team. The results (not displayed) indicate that a team's level of racial, gender, income, or religious diversity is not associated with the extent to which the director viewed those differences as enhancing their planning meetings. This finding indicates that realizing the performance benefits of diversity requires more than assembling a diverse leadership team; the team members must also regularly talk about their social differences.

Observations of organizations with a diverse leadership team that rarely talked about social differences (i.e., adopted a difference-blind approach) reveal that their practices generally reflected the practices of the team's majority social group. For example, one organization's racially diverse (albeit predominantly Caucasian) leadership team rarely talked about racial differences. Although the organization did not have an official policy forbidding such discussions, some of the leaders expressed concern that talking explicitly about racial differences might cause divisions within the organization. This organization tended to form alliances with Caucasian institutions and individuals, adopt strategies that were more relational than agitational, and organize events that privileged Caucasian cultural themes. Compared with organizations with a racially diverse leadership team whose members regularly discussed racial differences, this organization's racial differences did not appear to enhance the organization's planning efforts.

To summarize, the quantitative analysis indicates that among organizations with a diverse leadership team, realizing the performance benefits of diversity depends partly on how often the members participate in bridging cultural activities and discuss their social differences. The patterns of significance, however, vary by social dimension, mode of engagement, and organizational outcome, which suggests that different social dimensions and modes of engagement vary in their impact on different types of organizational activities. The qualitative data illustrate ways in which engaging social differences can help organizations with a diverse leadership team to mobilize their social resources, and future studies could explore sources of variation across dimensions, modes of engagement, and activities. Because these findings are based on analyses of community organizing organizations, the impact of engaging differences among other types of organizations is less clear and requires additional research. Generally though, the analyses indicate that merely having access to the wide variety of resources that a diverse leadership team can provide is insufficient for realizing the performance benefits of being diverse. Improving performance requires a mechanism, such as engaging social differences, to mobilize those resources.

## Conclusion

Building on [Tortoriello and Krackhardt's \(2010\)](#) finding that the benefits associated with bridging ties depend on the nature of the ties forming the bridge, this study demonstrates the importance of analyzing the type and content of interaction between socially diverse actors. The findings provide evidence that when members of a diverse leadership team engage their social differences, they can increase their organization's absorptive capacity—its ability to value, assimilate, and apply new ideas. Conversely, diverse leadership teams that minimize differences, avoid discussions about differences, or claim to be blind to differences are less likely to identify and incorporate members' novel ideas.

This study also extends [Vedres and Stark's \(2010\)](#) research on structural folds by analyzing a sample of socially diverse leadership teams that vary in their levels of intercohesion. Among the organizations analyzed in this study, the members of the leadership teams are representatives of the organizations' member institutions. Thus, each leader occupies a brokerage position, because they bridge their institution and the organization. However, each leadership team does not necessarily occupy the distinct network position known as a structural fold (in which the brokers' ties are overlapping and interpenetrating), because teams vary in the extent to which members interpenetrate their differences and cultivate familiarity across those differences. It is the teams whose members regularly engage their social differences that exhibit intercohesion and the characteristics of a structural fold. The mechanisms underlying structural folding—members' participation in multiple cohesive groups (in this case, their institution and the organization)—enable such teams to effectively access and mobilize their diverse resources.

Given that organizations with a diverse leadership team vary in the extent to which their members engage their social differences, it is important to measure not only the team's level of diversity but also how often its members engage their differences. This study indicates that an organization's ability to realize the performance benefits of having a diverse leadership team is related to how often the members participate in bridging cultural activities and discuss their social differences. This finding contributes to research highlighting the downsides of organizations adopting a difference-blind approach and the benefits of adopting difference-cognizant practices ([Foldy and Buckley 2014](#)). Even though diversity provides access to a greater variety of social resources, those resources risk being overlooked by the organization's leadership team if its members rarely engage their differences. If, however, the members regularly engage their differences, this type of interaction can help the organization mobilize its resources to develop alternative approaches and novel solutions. Idea generation and implementation can be improved by bringing together people from diverse backgrounds, ensuring they engage their social differences, and combining their unique social resources to address organizational challenges.

As the qualitative data illustrate how engaging differences can facilitate an organization's ability to access and mobilize its full range of social resources, the data also reveal a secondary dynamic between an organization's majority and



minority social groups. In the absence of engaging differences, organizations tend to adopt the majority group's practices. In contrast, engaging differences often gives voice to organizations' minority perspectives that challenge organizational norms and can lead to alternative practices (Fulton, Oyakawa, and Wood 2019). In such cases, members of the majority group are persuaded through deliberation with members of the minority group to incorporate their preferred practices. This dynamic suggests that engaging differences is associated with a shift in power that gives minority groups greater influence over organizational practices and can lead to greater equity (Ahmed 2012).

The positive relationship between engaging differences and performance suggests that the experiences are generative. This finding, which is supported by the qualitative data, advances research on social reflexivity. This study suggests that diverse teams whose members engage their social differences cultivate a reflexive orientation toward diversity. The analysis reveals that in order to realize the benefits of having a diverse leadership team, the team must exhibit not merely compositional diversity but also reflexive diversity. Although investigations into the mechanisms underlying the observed relationships and the nature of the teams' engagement with social differences are beyond the scope of this study, future studies could examine how such discussions are initiated and conducted, who leads and participates in the discussions, and the outcomes they produce.

Previous research indicates that when members of a diverse leadership team engage their social differences, it can lead to conflict and division (Sue 2015), which can undermine a team's performance. However, this study suggests that the performance benefits of engaging social differences may outweigh such drawbacks. Further research is needed to better understand the internal dynamics of diverse leadership teams that engage their social differences and how variations in approaches to engagement can lead to different organizational outcomes.

In conclusion, assembling a diverse leadership team does not automatically improve an organization's performance. Realizing the performance benefits of being diverse depends partly on the organization's ability to mobilize the variety of social resources diversity provides. An organization with a diverse leadership team can improve its ability to mobilize its resources by encouraging its members to interact in ways that engage their differences. When members participate in bridging cultural activities and discuss their social differences, they may better understand and appreciate different perspectives and be more inclined to incorporate the associated ideas and resources into their organization's activities.

## About the Author

**Brad R. Fulton** is an Associate Professor at Indiana University in the O'Neill School of Public and Environmental Affairs. His research examines the social, political, and economic impact of community-based organizations, and he directs the National Study of Community Organizing Organizations—a multilevel study that examines grassroots efforts to address socioeconomic inequality. Fulton's publications include *A Shared Future* (University of Chicago Press) and

articles published in the *American Sociological Review*, *Sociological Methods & Research*, and *Social Problems*.

## Notes

1. See Bell et al. 2011; Horwitz and Horwitz 2007; Walker and Stepick 2014; Williams and O'Reilly 1998.
2. The population for the NSCOO included every institution-based community organizing organization in the United States that has an office address, at least one paid employee, and institutional members.
3. The racial and religious groups reported in table 1 are the groups used to calculate the respective diversity scores.
4. Directors were asked to indicate the proportion of leadership team meetings each leader had attended in the previous 12 months. This ordered categorical variable has five response options (zero; less than half, but not zero; half; more than half, but not all; and all).
5. Additional analyses that shift the percentage threshold for a leadership team to be coded as diverse along a particular dimension do not generate significantly different outcomes.
6. Although community organizing organizations are known for their confrontational style of interacting with elected officials, many organizations have begun to complement this “hard power” with “soft power” tactics, which include intentionally cultivating strategic relationships with political officials (Wood et al. 2012).
7. Because this study surveyed the entire population of institution-based community organizing organizations in the United States and received responses from 94 percent of the organizations, a finite population correction factor— $\sqrt{(N-n)/(N-1)}$ —is applied to each analysis (Cochran 1977). The finite population correction factor is based on the 149 organizations (out of 189) that provided data for all of the variables used in the analysis.
8. For a broader discussion about the competing views on agitational versus relational approaches to organizing, see Smock (2004).

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