The Influence of Organizational Demography on Customer-Oriented Prosocial Behavior: An Exploratory Investigation

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This research examines the relationship between two constructs that so far have been studied independently of each other: organizational demography and prosocial organizational behavior (POB). Drawing on social psychology and organizational behavior literatures, we develop a conceptual framework that proposes how these constructs are interrelated. The framework suggests two hypotheses. First, diversity variables high in job-relatedness and low in visibility will be positively related to customer-oriented POB. Second, diversity variables low in job-relatedness and high in visibility will be negatively related to such POB. In a field study, we conduct a preliminary test of these predictions. Specifically, we use company records and questionnaire data (from a firm in the nonalcoholic beverage industry) to compute associations between demographic diversity and prosocial behavior in 223 work units. Results provide preliminary support for our hypotheses. Consistent with the first prediction, functional background diversity has a significant positive association ($b = 0.26, p < 0.01$) with the customer-oriented POB of work units, as does company tenure diversity ($b = 0.16, p < 0.05$). Consistent with the second prediction, gender diversity has a significant negative association ($b = -0.13, p < 0.05$) with customer-oriented POB; race diversity is also negatively related to POB ($b = -0.11$), but at a marginal significance level. These findings lend credence to our conceptual framework and suggest that further study of its components is warranted.

Over a decade ago, Pfeffer (1983, p. 303) called for greater attention to organizational demography, “the composition, in terms of basic attributes such as age, sex, educational level, length of service or residence, [and] race” of an organization or subunit. In the ensuing years, researchers have studied the effects of organizational demography across different levels of social systems, from dyads and work groups to the total organization. They have examined the effects of demography on a number of workplace outcomes, including technical communication (Zenger and Lawrence, 1989), turnover (McCain, O’Reilly, and Pfeffer, 1983; Pfeffer and O’Reilly, 1987; Wagner, Pfeffer, and O’Reilly, 1984), innovation (Ancona and Caldwell, 1992; Bantel and Jackson, 1989; O’Reilly and Flatt, 1989), and company financial performance (Murray, 1989; Siciliano, 1996).

As knowledge of organizational demography has grown, researchers have extended the range of variables that demography can be expected to affect. Our study continues in this tradition by examining the relationship between organizational demography and prosocial organizational behavior (POB), a potentially significant yet neglected variable in demography research. POB has been defined as behavior that is “(a) performed by a member of an organization, (b) directed toward an individual, group, or organization with whom he or she interacts while carrying out his or her organizational role, and (c) performed with the intention of promoting the welfare of the individual, group, or organization toward which it is directed” (Brief and Motowidlo, 1986, p. 711). Behavior classified as POB can either be in-role (sometimes referred to as role-prescribed) or extra-role. In-role POB involves the formal requirements of one’s job; it is discretionary and hence prosocial, because it is not directly enforced (George and Bettenhausen, 1990; George and Brief, 1992; McNeely and Meglino, 1994). Extra-role POB extends beyond job specifications and includes performances that are above the norm (George and Bettenhausen, 1990; George and Brief, 1992; McNeely and Meglino, 1994).
POB represents a “sometimes overlooked” dimension of organizational performance that can have significant implications for organizational functioning (Van Dyne, Graham, and Dieneresch, 1994, p. 766). When customers benefit from the POB of employees, they are likely to be more satisfied with the organization (Brief and Motowidlo, 1986). Employees engaged in POB may become sensitive to the discretionary aspects of their jobs (Karambaya, 1990), thereby gaining a sense of empowerment and motivation. In addition, in the process of seeking solutions to customers’, co-workers’, or other POB targets’ problems, employees may uncover critical areas for organizational improvement.

Although most previous studies have conceptualized POB as an individual-level phenomenon (e.g., O’Reilly and Chatman, 1986; Puffer, 1987), several scholars (e.g., George and Bettenhausen, 1990; Organ, 1988) have argued that POB is also meaningful at higher levels of analysis. More specifically, they have advocated examining the POB tendencies of work units (organizations or subunits). Organ (1988) suggested that it is the aggregate of prosocial behaviors that makes a difference, because most POBs, taken singly, are modest or trivial. He offered the example of voting to illustrate his point.

A single vote by a single person (let us hope there are not many cases of a large number of votes by a single person) is trivial, except in the most extraordinary and unforeseeable situations. Yet in the aggregate, voting by the electorate sustains the democratic system.

At the work-unit level, POB is a particularly promising candidate for organizational demography research. First, unit-level behaviors tend to be at least partially explained by work-unit characteristics (George and Bettenhausen, 1990); demography is such a characteristic. Second, the demography of a work unit is one indicator of the similarity of unit members, and similarity has been linked to helping behavior in prior research. Dovidio (1984) reviewed over 25 studies suggesting that similarity on such nondemographic variables as opinions, attitudes, and dress is associated with such helping behavior as signing a petition, mailing a stamped letter, or picking up dropped materials. The typical explanation for these findings was that similarity leads to feelings of “we-ness” (i.e., closeness or identification), which encourage helping behavior. Given the results of these studies, it is reasonable to expect that demographic similarity among work-unit members may have a similar affect on prosocial organizational behavior. Presumably, demographic homogeneity among members leads to feelings of closeness, which, in turn, enhance members’ propensity to engage in POB. The relationship between demography and POB may not be so straightforward, however. Because POB refers to work-related help, it is likely to demand a greater variety of skills and knowledge than simple helping behaviors, such as mailing a stamped letter require. Demographic heterogeneity may provide the diversity of skills and knowledge needed for POB. Thus, the nature of the relationship between work-unit demography and POB is not obvious and warrants investigation.

The purpose of our study is to explore, in a preliminary manner, the relationship between the demographic diversity of work units and the POB of their members. We first develop a conceptual framework suggesting how the demographic diversity of work units is related to prosocial organizational behavior. We then conduct an exploratory test of the theory using data from multiple work units in a consumer-products organization. Because the relevant targets of prosocial behavior may differ across organizational settings, it is important in POB research to identify and study those behaviors that are relevant and considered prosocial in the research site (Organ, 1988). We, therefore, focus on a type of prosocial organizational behavior that researchers (George and Bettenhausen, 1990; Kizilos and Cummings, 1994) and our own observations suggest are particularly relevant to consumer-products organizations: customer-oriented POB. This refers to discretionary and helpful behavior directed toward customers who are either internal to the firm (i.e., end-users within the same organization) or external to it. Customer-oriented POB can involve either in-role or extra-role efforts that are understood to provide customers with a genuine benefit (Brief and Motowidlo, 1986; George and Bettenhausen, 1990; Kizilos and Cummings, 1994).

Conceptual Framework

Recently, Miliken and Martins (1996, p. 403) noted that, in classifying different types of demographic diversity, “one common distinction is between diversity on observable or readily detectable attributes such as race or ethnic background, age, or gender, and diversity with respect to less visible or underlying attributes such as education, technical abilities, tenure in the organization, or socioeconomic background . . .”. Furthermore, many of the nonobservable types of diversity constitute “diversity of skills or knowledge (e.g., educational background, functional background, occupational background, range of industry experience)” (p. 404). Along the same lines, Pelled (1996) argued that demographic diversity variables may be placed along two continua. First, job-relatedness is the extent to which a demographic diversity variable shapes job skills and captures experiences relative to cognitive tasks in the workplace. Second, visibility is the extent to which demographic diversity is easily observed. Both properties can help account for the workplace consequences of a particular demographic diversity variable. Here, we argue that demographic diversity may either promote or impede work-unit POB, depending upon the job-relatedness and visibility of the particular diversity variable under consideration.

Diversity as Promoter of Customer-Oriented POB

When work-unit members have different demographic backgrounds, they tend to have different belief structures (i.e.,
different priorities, assumptions about future events, and understandings of alternatives), based on their distinct experiences (Hambrick and Mason, 1984, p. 195; Wiersema and Bantel, 1992). Consequently, they are likely to have different interpretations of tasks and work situations (Dearborn and Simon, 1958; Walsh, 1988; Waller, Huber, and Glick, 1995). These different interpretations tend to manifest themselves as task-related discourse or debates within the work unit (Bantel and Jackson, 1989; Sessa and Jackson, 1995). Such discourse can contribute to customer-oriented POB, as members strive to reconcile their dissimilar views about tasks. This exchange of information can lead to a better understanding of task issues (Bantel and Jackson, 1989); members may gain greater knowledge about the organization, its products, scheduling, and customers’ preferences. As a result, the unit as a whole will be more capable of helping customers, because managing relationships with customers requires members to:

- collect, process, and dispatch an inordinate amount of information . . . . [They] need to find out information about those customers and prospects, especially about their felt or unfelt needs and problems, their buying processes, their objectives and constraints. They need to process this information and integrate it with information they have already collected or will collect from their own organization about product specification, prices, delivery times, and maintenance. (Darmon, 1992, p. 13)

Tjosvold, Dann, and Wong (1992) found that an exchange of differing ideas among departments tends to enhance an organization’s customer service, a construct that has considerable overlap with customer-oriented POB. As Spencer and Spencer (1993, p. 42) have pointed out, a component of customer-service competence is “initiative (discretionary effort) to help or serve” the customer, including “taking routine or required actions” to meet customers’ needs as well as “going out of the way to be helpful.” Although having the ability to help does not guarantee prosocial behavior, research suggests that when individuals feel more competent and capable of undertaking particular actions, they are more likely to perform those actions (Bandura, 1986). Moreover, people are more likely to help when they perceive that it will effectively improve another’s condition (Utne and Kidd, 1980).

Certain types of demographic diversity are more likely to induce customer-oriented POB than others, depending upon their corresponding belief structures. When interpreting a task that requires information processing, people tend to draw on those belief structures most relevant to that task (Waller, Huber, and Glick, 1995, p. 948; Wickens, 1989). Thus, demographic attributes corresponding to task-relevant belief structures should be particularly influential in the perception of work-unit tasks. As described previously, the job-relatedness of a demographic attribute is the degree to which it captures experiences and skills relevant to cognitive tasks in the workplace (Pelled, 1996). If work-unit members differ with respect to a demographic attribute that is low in job-relatedness, then their divergent belief structures based on that attribute may not pertain to the work they do, and opposing task perceptions may not develop. In contrast, if work-unit members differ with respect to a highly job-related demographic attribute, then their divergent belief structures based on that attribute are likely to be pertinent to their work, and incongruent task perceptions are likely to emerge (Pelled, Eisenhardt, and Xin, in press). Thus, job-related types of demographic diversity in a work unit are more likely than nonjob-related types to trigger the task-related exchanges that benefit customer-oriented POB.

**Diversity as Impediment to Customer-Oriented POB**

Demographic diversity can also be a liability to work units. As work units become more diverse, members must organize a greater amount of information about each other; hence, they are more likely to use cognitive tools that help them cope with an overload of information. One such tool is categorization, the tendency for individuals to organize information about others by classifying them into social categories based on demographic or other attributes (Turner, 1982). According to social identity theory, people are motivated to maintain a favorable self-image; thus, upon placing themselves and others into categories, they tend to make between-category comparisons that provide themselves with a positive social identity; that is, “knowledge of his or her memberships in social groups together with the emotional significance of that knowledge” (Turner and Giles, 1981, p. 24). Specifically, individuals tend to favor their own category and to perceive its members as superior while stereotyping and developing a hostile attitude toward members of other categories. Hence, work-unit diversity may encourage antagonism among unit members.

Work-unit diversity may also be associated with intra-unit anxiety (Stephan and Stephan, 1985). Often, individuals have more exposure to persons in their own social category than to persons in other social categories. Consequently, they may view dissimilar coworkers as less predictable and may experience anxiety (e.g., concern about appropriate behavior) around them.

The hostility and anxiety that stem from work-unit diversity may distract members from attending to the needs of customers. Numerous studies have shown that negative emotional states reduce the attentional resources that people can devote to tasks (e.g., Ellis and Ashbrook, 1988; Roy-Byrne, Weingartner, Bierer, Thompson, and Post, 1986; Sullivan and Conway, 1989) and lead to greater self-focused attention (e.g., Conway, Giannopoulos, Csank, and Mendelson, 1993; Ingram, 1990). Clore, Schwarz, and Conway (1994, p. 371) explained that, as a result of “intruding thoughts and ruminations, negative affective states may interfere with information processing that requires more than minimal amounts of attentional resources.” Hence, when unit members feel tense or anxious around each other, they may lack the information-processing capability
required to understand customer needs and to integrate information for the benefit of customers.

In addition, negative emotions arising from work-unit diversity may reduce members’ opportunities to behave prosocially with customers. Because negative affect makes people less attractive and approachable (Coyne, 1976), customers may be reluctant to interact with and to seek help from employees experiencing the anxiety and tension associated with intra-unit diversity. Consequently, a decrease in customer-oriented POB may occur.

Certain types of diversity are more likely to diminish customer-oriented POB than others, depending upon their visibility. Demographic attributes that fall higher along the visibility continuum are more likely to be used as a basis for categorization. It takes relatively little effort to use easily observed attributes as categories, because such attributes are highly accessible (Tsui, Egan, and O'Reilly, 1992). People can quickly identify a highly visible attribute and use it to classify others, even if they have never spoken with (or about) them; the process is essentially automatic. In contrast, people must generally make inquiries to identify less visible attributes. Thus, highly visible types of demographic diversity are more likely to be associated with categorization and its accompanying intra-unit tensions. Ultimately, then, highly visible types of work-unit diversity will have a stronger tendency than less visible types to impede customer-oriented POB.

Predictions

The above theory and research suggest that, based on the job-relatedness and visibility properties, we can predict how demography variables will relate to customer-oriented POB.Variables high in job-relatedness and low in visibility should be positively related to customer-oriented POB. Variables high in visibility and low in job-relatedness should be negatively related to customer-oriented POB. Formally stated,

H1: Demography variables high in job-relatedness and low in visibility will have positive associations with customer-related prosocial organizational behavior.

H2: Demography variables high in visibility and low in job-relatedness will have negative associations with customer-oriented prosocial organizational behavior.

Exploratory Study

As an exploratory study of the proposed framework, we analyzed survey and personnel data from a consumer-products (beverage) firm. Although this dataset was collected by the company for purposes of organizational improvement, it contained relatively strong measures of demography and of customer-oriented POB at the work-unit level. Thus, the data provided an opportunity to test whether the proposed relationships between demography and POB exist. This preliminary assessment helps determine if those relationships warrant more complete assessment—in particular, further research examining not only demographic and POB variables, but also the sociopsychological processes that link those variables.

Sample and Data Collection

This study included data from multiple work units of a firm that manufactures, markets, and distributes nonalcoholic beverages. The company’s domestic operations encompass a total of 248 locations, each typically including all of the functions necessary for the sales and distribution of the firm’s products. Not all locations have production facilities on site, but those that do also have their own sales and distribution capabilities.

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“Although age similarity may produce similarity in general attitudes about work . . . , such attitudinal similarity is unlikely to have much direct bearing on conversations about technical work.”

On the visibility continuum, the relative positions of these demographic variables differed. We categorized age, race, and gender as highly visible, because, in regard to the perceptual salience of demographic variables, these physiological features are more likely to be visible than other demographic attributes. For example, Tsui, Egan, and O’Reilly (1992, p. 557) stated, “Age, sex, and race, because they are easily observable, are more accessible characteristics than company tenure.” Similarly, Fiske and Taylor (1991) suggested that age, race, and gender are more easily perceived than other attributes; such physical features “are not only visually accessed but also they are present immediately in face-to-face interactions” (p. 145). Conversely, we classified company tenure and functional background variables as low in visibility because neither can be determined with certainty nor closely estimated immediately upon looking at a person.

We obtained data on employee age, gender, race, company tenure, and functional background from corporate personnel records. We then measured the demographic diversity of each work unit with respect to the numeric data (age and company tenure) using the coefficient of variation (standard deviation within a work unit divided by the mean within that work unit). Upon comparing heterogeneity measures for numeric data, Allison (1978, p. 877) concluded that for “variables like age, where utility is neither strictly increasing nor especially relevant, the flat sensitivity of the coefficient of variation makes it the appropriate choice.” For the categorical variables (race, gender, and functional background), demographic diversity was measured using an entropy-based index recommended by Teachman (1980)[Equation (1)].

\[ H = - \sum_{i=1}^{I} P_i \log_2 P_i \]  

(1)

This index takes into account how work-unit members are distributed among possible categories of a variable. The total number of categories of a variable equals \( I \), and \( P_i \) is the fraction of unit members falling into category \( I \). For example, the gender variable has two possible states or categories (=2): “1” corresponds to female and “2” to male. If a given team of 10 members has three females and seven males, then \( P_1 \) equals 0.3 and \( P_2 \) equals 0.7. \( H \) then equals 0.61.

**CUSTOMER-ORIENTED POB.** The dependent variable in this study, customer-oriented prosocial behavior, was formed using five items from the firm’s questionnaire. The items asked about unit members’ perceptions of the extent to which their co-workers: (1) come up with good ideas to exceed what the customer says she or he wants; (2) act on their ideas to exceed customer expectations; (3) resolve customer problems immediately; (4) anticipate customers’ future needs; and (5) are willing to adapt to meet the changing needs of customers. Response anchors were as follows: 1 = strongly disagree; 2 = disagree; 3 = have mixed feelings; 4 = agree; 5 = strongly agree. Cronbach’s alpha for the scale was 0.88. Table 1 shows the correlations among the scale items.

Calculations of within-unit perceptual agreement justified aggregation of these items to obtain a work-unit measure of POB (Schneider and Bowen, 1985). Using James, Demaree, and Wolf’s (1984) measure, 223 units (out of 233 for which data were available) had within-unit agreement scores of at least 0.70. James and his colleagues (1984) indicated that within-setting agreement scores of 0.70 or above provide empirical justification for aggregation.

**WORK UNIT SIZE.** In examining the demography–POB relationship, we controlled for work-unit size obtained from personnel records. Work-unit size tends to be associated with greater demographic diversity. In addition, people are less likely to help others as the number of other people present increases, because such presence provides an individual with more opportunity to diffuse responsibility (Darley and Latané, 1968; Latané and Nida, 1981; Latané, Nida, and Wilson, 1981). Thus, work-unit size is likely to be negatively related to prosocial organizational behavior.

**Results**

Table 2 shows the means, standard deviations, and correlations among the variables in this study. Table 3 presents results of the regression analysis that we used to examine the proposed relationship between demography and customer-oriented POB.

Our conceptual framework suggested that demographic variables high in job-relatedness and low in visibility would

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**Table 1. Correlations among Items in the Customer-Oriented POB Scale**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Items</th>
<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>4</th>
<th>5</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Come up with good ideas to exceed what the customer says he/she wants</td>
<td>______</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Act on ideas to exceed customer expectations</td>
<td>0.69</td>
<td>______</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Resolve customer problems immediately</td>
<td>0.53</td>
<td>0.59</td>
<td>______</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Anticipate customers’ future needs</td>
<td>0.57</td>
<td>0.60</td>
<td>0.62</td>
<td>______</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Willing to adapt to meet the changing needs of our customers</td>
<td>0.54</td>
<td>0.58</td>
<td>0.58</td>
<td>0.58</td>
<td>______</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

All correlations were significant at \( p < 0.001 \), two-tailed.
Table 2. Means, Standard Deviations, and Intercorrelations among Study Variables

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>SD</th>
<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>4</th>
<th>5</th>
<th>6</th>
<th>7</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Customer-oriented prosocial behavior</td>
<td>3.73</td>
<td>0.20</td>
<td></td>
<td>0.19</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Work-unit size</td>
<td>97.62</td>
<td>117.31</td>
<td>0.19</td>
<td>0.50</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>3. Race diversity</td>
<td>0.37</td>
<td>0.32</td>
<td>0.32</td>
<td>0.31</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>4. Gender diversity</td>
<td>0.26</td>
<td>0.15</td>
<td>0.16</td>
<td>0.50</td>
<td>0.31</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Age diversity</td>
<td>0.25</td>
<td>0.04</td>
<td>0.08</td>
<td>0.12</td>
<td>0.04</td>
<td>0.06</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Company tenure diversity</td>
<td>0.90</td>
<td>0.21</td>
<td>0.12</td>
<td>0.04</td>
<td>0.43</td>
<td>0.05</td>
<td>0.33</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Functional background diversity</td>
<td>0.48</td>
<td>0.28</td>
<td>0.02</td>
<td>0.63</td>
<td>0.36</td>
<td>0.42</td>
<td>0.14</td>
<td>0.04</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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[r] ≥ .10 indicates significance at p < .10, one-tailed.
[r] ≥ .15 indicates significance at p < .05, one-tailed.

be positively related to customer-oriented POB. Results were consistent with this proposed relationship. Functional background diversity had a significant positive association (β = 0.26, p < 0.01) with the customer-oriented POB of work units, as did company tenure diversity (β = 0.16, p < 0.05).

The converse proposal, that demographic variables high in visibility and low in job-relatedness would be negatively related to customer-oriented POB, received partial support. Gender diversity had a significant negative association (β = -0.12, p < 0.05) with the customer-oriented POB of work units; race diversity was also negatively related to POB (β = -0.11), but at a marginal significance level slightly over 0.10. The results showed no support for the proposed negative association between age diversity and customer-oriented POB.

We performed several checks to assess whether multicollinearity among the independent variables was a problem in our analysis. First, we reviewed the zero-order correlations shown in Table 1. Although there is no definitive criterion for the level of correlation that signals multicollinearity, the general rule of thumb is that correlations of 0.75 or larger are problematic. The converse proposal, that demographic variables high in visibility and low in job-relatedness would be negatively related to customer-oriented POB, received partial support.

None of the correlations reached that magnitude. Second, we examined the variance inflation factor (VIF) of each independent variable. The VIF indicates how much the standard error of a regression estimate’s variance is increased by the inclusion of other predictors (Neter, Wasserman, and Kutner, 1989; Suitor and Pillemer, 1996). It equals 1/(1-R²), where R² is the amount of variation in a predictor variable that is accounted for by other predictor variables. According to Guo, Chumlea, and Cockram (1996), a rule of thumb is that a VIF exceeding 10 means that multicollinearity is affecting the regression estimates. The largest VIF we found was only 2.2, providing further evidence that multicollinearity was not a problem in this study.

Table 3. Regression of Customer-oriented POB on Diversity and Control Variables

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Independent Variables</th>
<th>Dependent Variable</th>
<th>Customer Oriented Prosocial Behavior</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Control variable</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Work-unit size</td>
<td>0.000</td>
<td>-0.247</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Predictor variables</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Race diversity</td>
<td>-0.068</td>
<td>-0.107</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender diversity</td>
<td>-0.173</td>
<td>-0.125</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age diversity</td>
<td>0.002</td>
<td>0.030</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Company tenure diversity</td>
<td>0.002</td>
<td>0.162</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Functional background diversity</td>
<td>0.187</td>
<td>0.257</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Constant</td>
<td>3.57</td>
<td>0.000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>R²</td>
<td>0.11***</td>
<td>4.26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>df</td>
<td>233</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

† approximately significant at .10 level.
* p < 0.05; ** p < 0.01; *** p < 0.001.
† One-tailed tests.

Discussion

Despite the prevalence of diversity in organizations and the importance of prosocial organizational behavior, there has been relatively little attempt to link these two constructs. To address this gap in knowledge, we developed a conceptual framework that suggests how different types of demographic diversity relate to customer-oriented POB. The findings are generally consistent with the relationships proposed in the framework. Demography variables that were high in job-relatedness and low in visibility were positively associated with customer-oriented POB, and demographic variables that were low in job-relatedness and high in visibility were, for the most part, negatively associated with customer-oriented POB.

These preliminary findings lend credence to our conceptual framework and suggest that a more complete assessment of the demography–POB relationship is warranted. Building on these results, a logical next step would be to measure and analyze intervening process variables, such as task debates and negative affect, that are likely to underlie this linkage. This would shed light on the “black box” between demographic diversity and workplace outcomes (Lawrence, 1997). A second fruitful area for subsequent research is to examine moderators of diversity–POB relationships, thus extending our framework to a contingency model. For example, diversity training programs for employees may diminish the negative effects of
diversity on customer-oriented POB. A third promising study would be examination of the relationship between work-unit demography and other prosocial behaviors. A given type of demography may, for example, have a different association with prosocial behavior toward co-workers than it has with prosocial behavior toward customers. On a related note, a more refined treatment of customer-oriented POB is needed.

Future studies of demography and POB could benefit from distinguishing between intrarole and extrarole customer-oriented POB or between "organizationally consistent" and "organizationally inconsistent" customer-oriented POBs (Brief and Motowidlo, 1986, p. 713).

Several nuances of our study limit conclusions that can be drawn from the findings and suggest how future research should be conducted. First, because the data were cross sectional, they limit our ability to infer causality. Second, the work units in our sample all belonged to a single parent corporation in the nonalcoholic beverage industry; it is, therefore, difficult to know whether the results would hold in different types of organizations. Third, in our study, diversity variables that were highly job-related happened to be low in visibility, and diversity variables that were low in job-relatedness were high in visibility. If we were to focus on another set of diversity variables, however, we might find that some are high (or low) in both properties (i.e., visibility and job-relatedness). These limitations suggest that future research in this area would benefit from longitudinal data, examination of different types of organizations, and inclusion of additional kinds of diversity variables.

In conclusion, the current study—although exploratory in nature—makes significant contributions. Of these, the most substantial is the integration of two important, yet relatively independent, streams of research. The study enhances knowledge of prosocial organizational behavior by identifying organizational demography as a significant correlate of customer-oriented POB. Conversely, it adds to our understanding of organizational demography by examining an outcome variable that demography researchers have not previously examined. In doing so, the study incorporates a broader set of diversity variables than most prior demography studies have incorporated. This investigation also contributes by supporting the notion that job-relatedness and visibility are useful properties for classifying demographic variables and understanding their effects in the workplace. These contributions will likely lead to greater scholarly interest in demography, in POB, and in the relationship between these, to date, separate areas of research.

References


