

# Motivation to Learn and Diversity Training: Application of the Theory of Planned Behavior

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*Although training programs are an important component in most companies' diversity initiatives, little theoretical guidance is available for their implementation. This article proposes a model based on the theory of planned behavior, which addresses the roles of attitude, subjective norms, and perceived behavioral control in motivation to learn from a diversity training program. The model suggests a number of hypotheses that could be tested to enhance our understanding of the motivation-to-learn construct. Additionally, the model provides practical advice for companies seeking to implement successful diversity training programs.*

In a recent Society for Human Resource Management (SHRM) survey, 66 percent of 321 responding companies reported a strong commitment to diversity (Kluttz, 2002). These companies recognize a number of reasons to encourage the diversification of their workforce. Projected changes in the demographic composition of the population are often cited as a rationale (Digh, 1998). Many organizations also have found that diversity provides a strategic advantage (Flynn, 1998) and helps them serve an increasingly diverse customer base (Miller, 1999). Furthermore, evidence suggests that companies with innovative human resource development programs that encourage full employee participation may reap benefits of enhanced shareholder value (Orlando & Johnson, 2001).

Most diversity programs begin with some form of awareness training for employees (Flynn, 1998). Indeed, recognizing the importance of effective training programs to overall diversity initiatives, corporate spending on diversity training remains strong even in economic slowdowns (Leonard, 2002; Kluttz, 2002). These programs strive to sensitize workers to differing values, communication norms, and interaction patterns that could thwart coordination between people from different cultural backgrounds. More pragmatically,

these programs also seek to develop employees' communication skills to ensure that their interactions are free from prejudicial responses that pose potential legal liability for the organization.

Despite the recognized importance of diversity training programs, neither human resource practitioners nor researchers who study diversity in organizations have developed theory-based models to explain how these programs succeed or fail. Caveats such as "make top management support for the program visible" and "tie diversity initiatives to performance evaluations" are known to be correlated with effective programs (Dobbs & Brown, 1997), but how and why these commonly accepted mandates work is yet to be determined. Given the large amounts of money and time that companies have already devoted to diversity initiatives, and the projected increase in spending for these programs in coming years (Kluttz, 2002), it is important to comb the literature carefully to develop theory-based assessments to determine, before the fact, whether a diversity training program has a good chance of succeeding. This article seeks to provide some insight into this area.

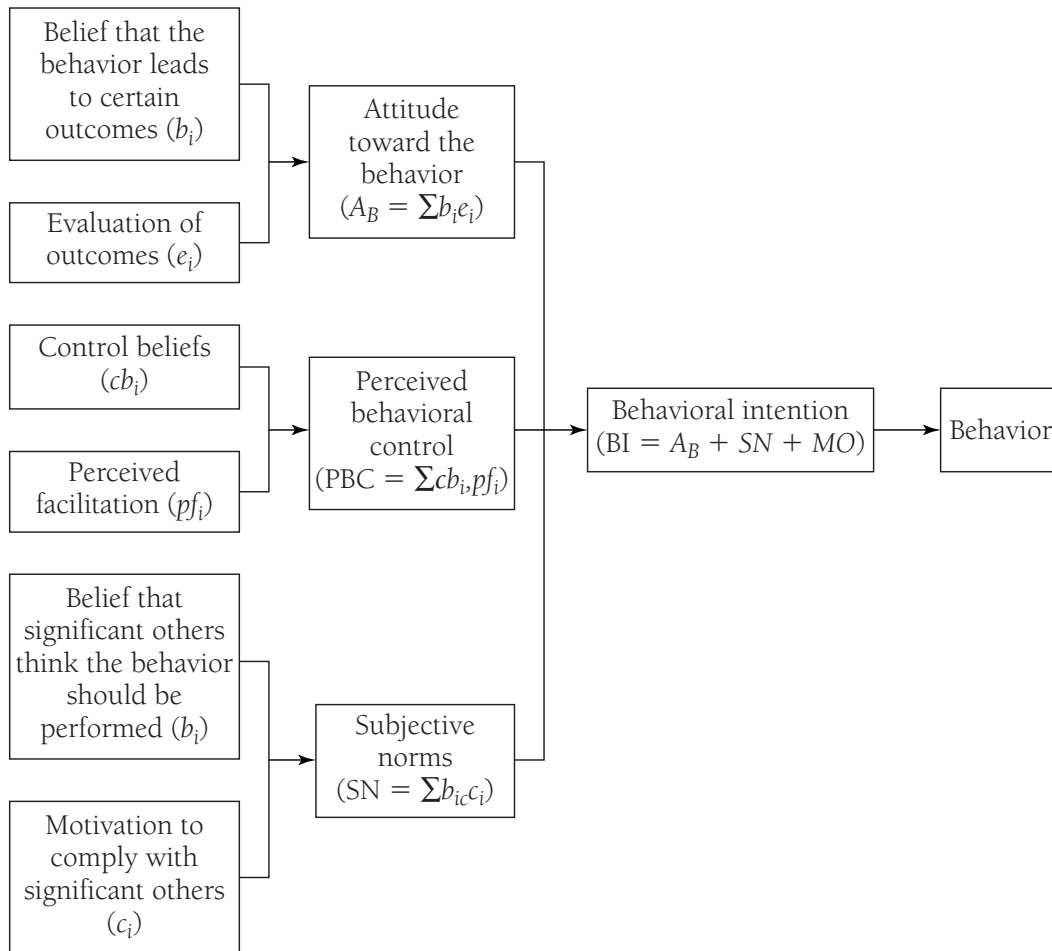
I use the theory of planned behavior (TPB) to explain how and why adult learners, such as employees of an organization, are motivated to learn diversity-friendly behaviors. I begin with brief overviews of TPB and the motivation-to-learn construct, propose a model based on TPB that explains its effect on learning motivation for diversity training programs, and present specific hypotheses for study suggested by the model. After a brief presentation of relevant research methods, I conclude with a discussion of expected results and their implications for future research.

## **The Theory of Planned Behavior**

The theory of planned behavior (Figure 1) has been a useful tool to predict a wide range of behaviors, from complying with speed limits (Elliott, Armitage, & Baughan, 2003) to engaging in regular exercise (Lowe, Bennett, Walker, Milne, & Bozionelos, 2003; for reviews, see Armitage & Conner, 1999; Godin & Kok, 1996; Manstead & Parker, 1995). It posits that behavioral intentions are the main determinants of behavior. Intentions are determined by three independent components: attitudes toward the behavior, subjective norms, and perceived behavioral control (Ajzen, 1991). The first component, attitude toward the behavior, reflects the positive or negative evaluation a person holds about the behavior's potential outcomes. More specifically, this attitude comprises a person's salient beliefs about the outcomes associated with a behavior, multiplied by his or her evaluation of those outcomes as positive or negative. Positive and negative beliefs are then summed to determine the person's overall attitude toward the behavior.

The second component, subjective norms, reflects the individual's perception of social support for or opposition to his or her performance of the behavior (Ajzen & Fishbein, 1980). Again, subjective norms have two separate

Figure 1. Theory of Planned Behavior



components. Normative beliefs are actors' perceptions that certain individuals want them to perform the behavior. Motivation to comply represents the relative importance of the referent person to the actor. This element of behavioral intentions is determined by the extent to which the actor believes the behavior is desired by significant referent others, multiplied by the actor's motivation to comply with those referents. Again, all subjective norms are added together to determine the overall position of salient others toward the behavior (Ajzen & Fishbein, 1980).

Fishbein and Ajzen (1975) acknowledged that an individual's choice of social referents could vary widely. The "other" whose opinions are identified as salient for a particular action will elicit more or less compliance based on the nature of the relationship between the actor and the referent and the perceived power of the referent source (Ajzen & Fishbein, 1980). The authors also stressed that subjective norms are a product of actors' perceptions of the desires of referent others, which may or may not accurately reflect significant others' beliefs.

Finally, Ajzen (1991) defined perceived control as people's perception of the ease or difficulty of performing the behavior. Behaviors are more likely to result

from intention when people believe they have the resources to perform the behavior and are likely to be successful at doing so. Perceived control comprises control beliefs, or the belief that required resources and opportunities are available to carry out the behavior, and perceived facilitation, or the assessment of the importance of those resources to successfully completing the behavior (Ajzen, 1991). Figure 1 explains the configuration of this expanded theory.

### **Motivation to Learn**

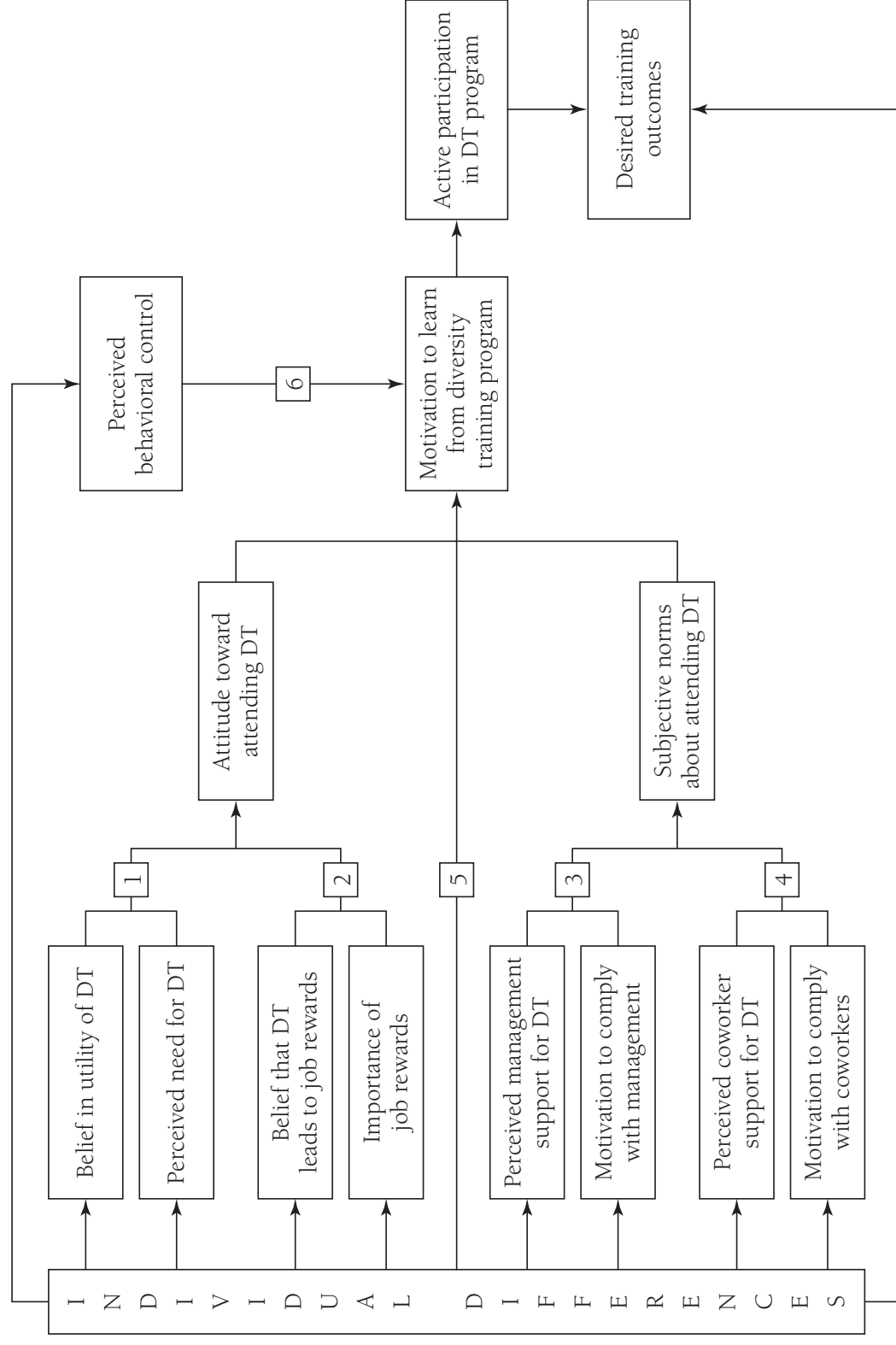
Noe and Schmitt (1986) defined motivation to learn as a specific desire on the part of the trainee to learn the content of a training program. Significant research confirms Maier's contention (1973) that even individuals with the requisite ability will perform poorly in training if their motivation is low and that high motivation to engage in a training program results in more learning (Baldwin, Magjuka, & Loher, 1991; Martocchio & Webster, 1992; Mathieu, Tannenbaum, & Salas, 1992; Quinones, 1995). Trainees' motivation to learn influences their decisions regarding the direction, focus, and level of effort that constitute their participation in a training program (Noe, Wilk, Mullen, & Wanek, 1997). Research has established that variables such as relevant pre-training experiences (Smith-Jentsch, Jentsch, Payne, & Salas, 1996) and participant choice to attend training (Baldwin et al., 1991) contribute to participants' motivation to learn. However, much of this work has focused on examination of the personality variables associated with learning motivation rather than providing a theoretical explanation of the motivational process. While individual difference variables are certainly an important part of the puzzle (and discussed later in this article), they do not account for the process by which individuals' attitudes contribute to learning motivation. Mathieu and Martineau (1997) pointed out that motivation to learn is a simple, direct, and straightforward way to gauge how trainees view their participation, but it says little about why some trainees are more motivated than others and provides very little diagnostic information (Tharenou, 2001). Noe (1986) postulated that trainees' perceptions of a supportive work environment and positive attitudes toward the training topic would result in higher motivation to learn. Similarly, supervisor support for training has been consistently related to positive participation in training and development (Noe & Wilk, 1993).

Using TPB, we can view motivation to learn as a behavioral intention that should predict trainees' positive behaviors, such as listening and fully engaging in activities, that are conducive to learning from a diversity training program.

### **TPB, Motivation to Learn, and Diversity Training**

The role of TPB in predicting motivation to learn from a diversity training (DT) program is shown in Figure 2. The model first indicates two potential components of an individual's attitude toward diversity training. A person's belief

Figure 2. TPB-Based Model of Influences on Motivation to Learn from Diversity Training Programs



about the utility of diversity training in the reduction of workplace discrimination, multiplied by the perceived value of ending discrimination, could form one attitude toward attending a diversity training session (link 1). The belief that nondiscriminatory behavior is necessary to attain job rewards, multiplied by the value placed on those rewards, is another independent attitude (link 2).

TPB also emphasizes the importance of perceived social norms in developing behavioral intentions toward a diversity training session. In the organizational context, two sources of normative information are likely to be particularly salient. One should be trainees' perceptions of managerial support for the training (Noe, 1986), multiplied by trainees' motivation to comply with management's preferences (link 3). Perceptions of coworker support for the training program, multiplied by the level of motivation to comply with coworkers' preferences, are the second component of the subjective norm evaluation (link 4). Link 5 indicates that individual differences will influence trainee motivation to learn, independent of TPB-related effects.

Finally, in this context, procedural control relates to a person's belief that he or she has the requisite resources to engage fully in the training program. On one level, this relationship is perhaps best thought of as self-efficacy, or "people's judgments of their capabilities to organize and execute courses of action required to attain designated types of performance" (Bandura, 1986, p. 391). A significant body of research supports the claim that self-efficacy is positively related to training outcomes (Gist, 1989; Gist, Schwoerer, & Rosen, 1989; Mathieu, Martineau, & Tannenbaum, 1993). Since self-efficacy also enhances people's desire to perform activities at which they believe they can excel (Bandura, 1986), it is logical to conclude that individuals who believe that they have the cognitive resources to complete diversity training successfully would be motivated to do so (Mathieu & Martineau, 1997). Similarly, people who believe that they will lack the time, energy, or other resources to complete the program successfully should report less motivation. This is conveyed in link 6.

### Hypotheses Suggested by the Model

This model provides fertile ground for future investigations. Each link suggests one or more testable hypotheses, any of which could both expand our knowledge of the motivation-to-learn construct and help practitioners design successful diversity training programs.

***Attitudes Toward the Behavior and Motivation to Learn.*** TPB suggests that trainees' attitudes toward attending a diversity training session are composed of individual beliefs about the potential outcomes of the training multiplied by the perceived valence of those outcomes. For example, diversity training failures have received a great deal of publicity in the business literature. These miscues may contribute to workers' beliefs that such training is useless at best and potentially dangerous. In this instance, the potential

trainee would have a salient negative belief about the utility of diversity training that, in the absence of conflicting information, would seem quite compelling. Moreover, because this attitude is behavior specific, it would likely be heavily weighted in the formation of an overall attitude toward diversity training (Fishbein & Ajzen, 1975). In contrast, individuals who have experienced diversity training programs that positively affected their ability to succeed in a diverse work environment should have positive beliefs about the utility of diversity training. This is consistent with past research confirming the influence of past experiences on motivation to learn (Smith-Jentsch et al., 1996):

*HYPOTHESIS 1. Employees who believe in the efficacy of diversity training will report higher motivation to learn than will those with negative beliefs about training efficacy.*

These beliefs will be multiplied by the trainee's perceptions of the valence of training outcomes—in this case, better handling of diversity issues in the workplace. As with mathematical operations, the multiplicative effect can independently render this component of the overall attitude toward training positive or negative. For example, an employee may believe that training could positively affect his or her ability to deal effectively with a variety of different coworkers, but may also feel that the workplace does not currently offer opportunities for diverse interactions. This explains previous research findings that individuals who do not perceive diversity-related problems within their organization do not view diversity training sessions as necessary (Sussman, 1997). Similarly, it is consistent with research indicating that trainees have higher motivation to learn when they have personally encountered problems in the workplace that are addressed in a training program (Smith-Jentsch et al., 1996):

*HYPOTHESIS 2A. Employees who have experienced diversity-related difficulties on the job will report higher motivation to learn than will those who have not had related difficulties.*

*HYPOTHESIS 2B. Employees who perceive their workplace as highly diverse will report higher motivation to learn than will those who do not perceive the workplace as diverse.*

In addition, employees should be motivated by potential rewards for effectively managing diversity in the workplace. Prior research confirms that framing training assignments as developmental, rather than punitive, positively affects motivation to learn (Quinones, 1995). This parallels case study evidence that companies can encourage good diversity management strategies by linking them directly to job rewards (Flynn, 1998). As the model demonstrates, an individual's appraisal of the relative importance of job rewards, multiplied



by his or her belief that being trained in diversity issues will garner those rewards, should enhance motivation to learn. So when organizations frame diversity training as the provision of a job-related skill, employees should hold more positive attitudes toward the training:

*HYPOTHESIS 3A: Employees who perceive diversity training assignments as developmental will report higher motivation to learn than will those who perceive training assignments as punitive.*

Digh (1998) noted that companies that incorporate diversity issues into standard performance appraisal and bonus award systems report significantly higher satisfaction with their diversity programs. When employees see that the company has incorporated diversity measures into performance appraisal and that those who promote multiculturalism in the workplace are rewarded, they are more likely to develop positive attitudes toward learning those behaviors (Gross, 1999):

*HYPOTHESIS 3B: Employees who perceive rewards for diversity-friendly behaviors at work will report higher motivation to learn than will those who do not perceive potential rewards.*

The model proposes only two beliefs that constitute an employee's attitude toward attending diversity training: one in the utility of the training program and the other in the company's commitment to providing rewards for diversity-friendly behavior. Current research suggests that these will be the two most common beliefs, but further investigation may uncover other salient attitudes. As noted later in this article, TPB allows researchers to identify and evaluate these and other beliefs about diversity training that can affect motivation to learn.

***Perceptions of Others' Attitudes and Subjective Norms.*** Companies have long recognized that managers need to set the tone for diversity initiatives. In firms where white male senior managers believed that diversity distracted them from the "real work" of contributing to the bottom line of the company, diversity initiatives have been largely unsuccessful (Zane, 1998). Employee trust in management has been anecdotally identified as a critical component of willingness to accept diversity initiatives (Frost, 1999). TPB helps us understand why employees might, for example, be more motivated to please their immediate supervisor than to learn from diversity training if they believe that the supervisor does not support diversity. Because supervisors often control significant rewards in organizations, they are an important subjective norm. Faceless promoters of diversity programs are not as salient to individual employees; supervisors' wishes are better known and more salient.

In addition, the tone in which managers introduce training sends a powerful message. Some programs are presented as if "some white male did



something inappropriate so now we all have to be here” (Flynn, 1999, p. 53). Other programs are framed as the company’s grudging effort to meet legal requirements rather than as mechanisms for real corporate change (Rosner, 1999). In these circumstances, individual trainees receive the message that their superiors are not fully committed to diversity (Pearlman, 1996). Given this message, TPB suggests that they are unlikely to be motivated to learn new diversity behaviors:

*HYPOTHESIS 4. Employees who believe that their immediate supervisor supports diversity training will report higher motivation to learn than will employees who do not perceive supervisor support.*

Work group social norms also have a strong influence on individual workers. Consequently, diversity efforts that are not endorsed by group opinion leaders may backfire. To the extent that employees believe that components of their work environment, such as their coworkers’ existing attitudes toward diversity, might prevent them from applying newly learned diversity management skills on the job, they are less likely to be motivated to learn diversity management principles (Mathieu et al., 1992). On a more positive note, to the extent that work groups are perceived to be supportive of the training intervention, individuals will be likely to have high learning motivation (Mathieu & Martineau, 1997).

*HYPOTHESIS 5. Employees who believe that their work groups support diversity training will report higher motivation to learn than will employees who do not perceive work group support.*

**Individual Differences and Motivation to Learn.** As shown in Figure 2, individual differences may have a direct effect on motivation to learn. Although a complete discussion of the role of individual difference constructs in training motivation is beyond the scope of this article (see Ford, Smith, Sego, & Quinones, 1993, and Noe, 1986, for reviews), some antecedents are noteworthy in the diversity training context. First, personality traits such as goal orientation and conscientiousness have a generally positive effect on motivation to learn (Colquitt & Simmering, 1998). Second, anxiety has a negative effect on motivation to learn (Colquitt, LePine, & Noe, 2000), as does negative affectivity generally (Cole, Smith, & Harris, 2000). Age may play a role in motivation to learn; some studies have reported that older people are less motivated to learn new technologies than are younger people (Elias, Elias, Robbins, & Gage, 1987). However, other demographic characteristics, such as gender or race, have not been robust predictors of learning motivation (Mathieu & Martineau, 1997).

In addition, self-efficacy may influence both motivation to learn and training performance (Mathieu et al., 1993). For example, self-efficacy has been shown to play a significant role in expatriates’ ability and willingness

to adapt to new cultures effectively (Harrison, Chadwick & Scales, 1996); this finding suggests that trainees high in self-efficacy will be more likely to embrace new behaviors necessary to interact in a diversity-friendly environment. Consistent with self-efficacy theory, many TPB researchers have validated the importance of task-specific self-efficacy beliefs to the formation of behavioral intentions (Quine & Rubin, 1997; Wulfert & Wan, 1995). However, research results on similar constructs have been mixed. For example, Laflin, Moore-Hirschl, Weis, and Hayes (1994) found that while attitudes and norms predicted drug and alcohol use among high school and college students, self-esteem did not add significantly to the prediction of such behaviors.

Researchers have also noted that affiliations such as close family ties influence both attitudes and the salience of various kinds of referent norms to some extent (Stafleu, Van Staveren, Degraaf, Burema & Hautvast, 1995). Other scholars have investigated gender differences in the predictive power of TPB components, finding that women are slightly more influenced by social normative information than are men (Grogan, Bell, & Conner, 1997). As these examples demonstrate, the inclusion of individual difference variables makes the model highly complex. More systematic research is needed in this area to separate spurious correlations from real differences in behavioral intention formation that result from individual difference variables.

### **Research Methods for TPB**

Fishbein and Ajzen (1975) offered specific guidelines for research using TPB that could enhance our understanding of diversity training interventions. Currently, in the best-case scenarios, employee surveys are distributed before and after such training to assess readiness for training and affective reactions to the program (White, 1998). For example, instruments such as Tulin's Diversity Awareness Instrument (1995) might be divided into two equal sections to provide pre- and posttraining assessments of knowledge of diversity-related issues in the workplace. The test provides a measure of respondents' level of knowledge of general and business-related multicultural information.

Using TPB, the pretraining assessment process can be significantly enhanced. Fishbein and Ajzen (1975) recommended a four-stage research design when applying TPB to a specific behavior: data elicitation, data synthesis, data collection, and data analysis (see Harrison, 1995, for an excellent example of the use of this process). The first stage, elicitation, involves learning what attitudes and subjective norms are most salient. Fishbein (1967) argues that every behavioral intention is composed of unique combinations of beliefs and that those that have become most salient over time will be articulated first when a subject is asked to describe his or her behavior. Therefore, in the elicitation stage, researchers begin with focus groups in which members of the target population are asked to list no more than ten of their

beliefs about an object or action (Ajzen & Fishbein, 1980). In this context, subjects would be asked open-ended questions about the importance of diversity in their workplace, the prevalence of discrimination in their firm or work group, and the utility of diversity training programs. Their perceptions about possible rewards for good diversity-related practices should also be explored. This would elicit a list of attitudes toward the behavior of attending diversity training. In addition, focus group members would be asked to identify the individuals whose opinions about multiculturalism and diversity training are most salient to them and describe their perceptions of the posture of each of these people toward participation in a diversity training program. Finally, participants would be asked to talk about what they believe they could learn from a diversity training program and whether they have sufficient resources (such as time and appropriate workload) to attend the program.

The next step, a synthesis of responses, is brief. Here, researchers simply aggregate the data to identify the most frequently mentioned beliefs, referent others, and behavioral controls. TPB researchers have found that this measure provides useful group-level information about the target behavior (Harrison, 1995). Using this information, researchers develop a questionnaire containing the most-often-mentioned beliefs, social normative referents, and moral positions. Then, in the data collection phase, the entire work group is given this survey and asked to rate their agreement with each statement on a Likert-type scale. Finally, researchers analyze the data to predict behavioral intentions (in this case, the likelihood that a work group is motivated to learn from a diversity training program). Using the mathematical formulas suggested by the model shown in Figure 1, Fishbein and Ajzen (1975) suggest that behavioral intentions, and hence behaviors, can be accurately predicted. Moreover, if there are conflicts among any of the three components, this measurement strategy allows researchers to identify which are relatively more important to the target population. For example, it might be that work group members have positive beliefs that diversity training programs are effective, but believe that their workload prohibits them from taking time away from work to attend the program. In this instance, researchers could predict a specific issue causing low motivation to learn from a diversity training program.

Although this method provides rich data for analysis, researchers and practitioners may not always have sufficient time and resources to use it. As a shortcut, some researchers have elected to ask only general questions about each predictor of behavioral intentions. For example, in their study of nurses' behavioral intentions to leave their current employment, Prestholdt, Lane, and Mathews asked nurses if they felt that "people who are most important to me think I should leave the hospital" (1987, p. 223). These and other researchers have demonstrated that TPB is a robust predictor of behavioral intentions even when study participants are asked generally about their attitudes and beliefs.

## Discussion and Conclusion

The model shown in Figure 2 has the potential to inform future research investigating trainees' motivation to learn from diversity training programs. I have outlined hypotheses relevant to each segment of the model, any of which could be studied to provide rich data that would contribute to our understanding of employees' experiences in diversity training programs. Since diversity-related investigations are often atheoretical (Dass & Parker, 1999), this is an important first step in the development of a theory-based model of diversity program success.

This model has the potential to inform training and development research in many ways. First, by explicitly identifying important components of training-related attitudes (beliefs, subjective norms, and perceived control), it provides researchers with a more sophisticated and rich measurement tool to aid understanding of the motivation-to-learn construct. Second, it is possible that the model could provide insight into behavioral intentions to transfer learned knowledge to the workplace by identifying specific beliefs and subjective norms that would impede or enhance transfer. Finally, while the prescribed nature of research using TPB is inherently idiosyncratic to the work group under scrutiny, aggregation of these findings across work populations could shed light on adult learners' perceptions of diversity training in a variety of contexts. Such knowledge would enhance our ability to design and implement successful diversity training programs.

**Limitations.** Despite its potential for future research, the proposed model does have some limitations. First, the model relates only to trainees' motivation to learn. Certainly this is an important part of a training program, but it is still only one piece of the puzzle. While TPB may be a helpful tool when investigating trainees' intentions to transfer learned behaviors to the workplace, for example, the model presented here does not directly inform that work. Second, training is only a small part of a company's overall diversity management program. The benefits of good diversity management programs cited earlier in this article will not be achieved solely by providing good diversity training.

Third, the model assumes that attendance at a diversity training session is mandated rather than voluntary. Providing trainees with choice and voice in the creation and implementation of diversity-friendly programs could modify the dynamics of the model in many ways. Employees may also choose to attend programs that emphasize elements of diversity policies that correlate with their own views on the topic, enhancing motivation to learn (Dass & Parker, 1999).

**Practical Implications.** While the model provides rich opportunities for researchers, it also suggests some guidelines for practitioners who wish to develop more effective diversity initiatives in organizations. First, it offers a way to diagnose employee beliefs that can help or hinder the initiation of diversity training programs. Using the study techniques suggested by the model, it is

possible to troubleshoot a work group's motivation to engage in diversity programs and determine pretraining interventions that can enhance participants' motivation to learn. For example, such a diagnosis might lead to recommendations such as these:

- *Specific information about a company's diversity programs should be regularly communicated to employees.* This may enhance awareness of diversity and influence beliefs about the need for diversity training programs. If surveys concluded that employees did not believe that diversity programs were necessary in their workplace, it may make sense to publicize information such as the number of companywide complaints related to equal employment opportunity, retention and development or promotion figures for women and minorities, and visual checks of employee segregation during nonwork periods, such as in the lunchroom (Digh, 1998; Mueller, 1998; White, 1998).

- *Effective management of power dynamics is critical.* If managers feel threatened by a diversity initiative, they may be unlikely to show support for the program to their subordinates or peers (Frost, 1999). The TPB-based intervention, conducted before training begins, can pinpoint the source of negative subjective norms, and targeted efforts can be made to educate those who are opposed to the training initiative. Similarly, companies may want to involve group opinion leaders in preparing and publicizing the program. Workers are also influenced by their peers' beliefs about diversity training. Consequently, individuals identified as opinion leaders by the TPB focus groups need special attention to ensure that they feel positively toward diversity training initiatives. To the extent that they are encouraged to voice positive expectations of diversity training programs, their peers' motivation to learn from those programs should be enhanced.

Diversity programs have the potential to provide organizations with significant economic and intangible benefits. Employees' motivation to learn from diversity training programs is one important component of the program, and without it, companies are not likely to realize positive returns on their diversity training investments. TPB provides a way for organizations to assess the readiness of their employee group for diversity interventions. By identifying components of attitudes, moral and affective beliefs, and subjective norms regarding diversity training, companies can identify barriers that would prevent workers from fully engaging in the diversity training process. The proposed model is a potentially valuable contribution to researchers and practitioners, for it provides a theory-based explanation for why diversity training initiatives succeed and why they fail. In addition, the intersection of TPB and diversity training is a potentially fruitful place for researchers to examine the effectiveness of diversity training interventions.



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