

Comment Column  
**Playing the diversity game**

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Like you, I have filled out my fair share of diversity surveys. They're the ones that ask about your race, religion, disabilities and so on. Sadly, I am boringly non-diverse. I'm never going to boost anyone's diversity stats.

The questions on these surveys used to be quite simple. Not any more. For instance, "What is your sexual orientation?" gives you more choices than a Chinese menu. One choice is "two-spirited," which was added a few years ago; now there's a new one, called "questioning." It gets harder and harder to keep up.

The sexual orientation known as "questioning" is included in a lengthy survey distributed to the 65,000 people who work for the Ontario Public Service. As one of the biggest employers in Canada, the Ontario Public Service understandably strives to be as diverse as possible. It has a chief diversity officer, a three-year strategic plan, and a pile of training programs that will acquaint you with your biases and teach you to overcome them. "You can confront your stereotypes and try to break the cycle," says one lesson.

But can you? The diversity business is a huge and entrenched industry. Yet, there's no reliable scientific evidence to show whether it works.

"Even with the best practices, you're not going to get much of an effect," Frank Dobbin, a Harvard sociology professor, told The Boston Globe. His research team studied more than 800 companies over three decades and found that diversity training made very little difference in who gets hired and promoted.

"We know much more about the diagnosis of the problem than we do about the treatment," says Elizabeth Levy Paluck, a psychologist at Princeton University. "Training often doesn't translate into actual behaviour."

In fact, diversity training can make matters worse. That's because focusing on difference actually tends to increase prejudice. "It may activate bias rather than reduce it," says Prof. Paluck. "When you make these explicit and conscious attempts to regulate your thoughts, this can sometimes exaggerate stereotyping and raise issues that may not otherwise have come up."

In other words, if we want people to work better together, maybe we should focus on our common humanity instead.

Personally, I think diversity is a good and necessary thing. We should have a civil service that looks more or less like the people it's supposed to serve. And in Ontario, we generally do. Most of this admirably diverse work force say they have good relations with their colleagues and feel fairly treated by their employer. So rosy is this picture that you might even think the government's vast diversity machine is a solution looking for a problem.

This is not the official view, needless to say. The official view is that, as our workplaces become more and more diverse, we are in need of more and more training. The new frontier is "micro-inequities." Never heard of them? You will.

"While they may appear as rudeness, micro-inequities are often motivated by a desire to exclude or discriminate," says the civil service training manual. Examples of micro-inequities include constantly interrupting people when they're talking, making them wait while you're on the cellphone, and so on. I used

to think of such stuff as “behaving like a jerk,” but now I know better. Micro-inequities, insists one expert, “have been a principal scaffolding for discrimination.”

As long as diversity experts are able to redefine poor interpersonal skills as proof of bias, they will never lack for work. Yet, not everyone wants to play this game. A bracing number of the Ontario civil servants who responded to the diversity survey – roughly 20 per cent of them – declined to answer the questions about their ethnic background, culture, skin colour, religion or sexual preferences. Good for them. Their message is, we're all Canadians, or soon will be. And the rest of it is really nobody else's business.

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