

# The Good or The Bad: Implications of Ethnic Diversity in Interpersonal Conflicts at Work

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## ABSTRACT

**Aim of the Study:** The objective of this study is to investigate the relationship between ethnic diversity and Interpersonal Conflicts at Work (IPCW) among staff of universities located in Rawalpindi and Islamabad, Pakistan. Particularly, it explores the dynamics of ethnic diversity and how these dynamics affects interpersonal conflicts at work.

**Methodology:** Data were collected from administrative and academic staff of the universities using a structured questionnaire. The independent variable, ethnic diversity and dependent variable, IPCW, were measured by adopting established measures developed by Phinney, J. (1992) and Spector & Jex (1998), respectively. A total of 200 samples were collected by using in person and online data collection approaches. The proposed study model was tested using correlation and hierarchical multiple regression tests carried out in SPSS software.

**Findings:** The study results point out that ethnic diversity has a significant impact on interpersonal conflicts in the workplace among employees of the universities. This significant relationship between ethnic diversity and IPCW indicates the challenges that ethnic diversity can pose in the workplace. Furthermore, male employees with diverse ethnic background are more prone to IPCW as compared to their female counterparts. Whereas employees from different age groups and levels of work experience remained consistent regardless of variations in age or work experience.

**Implications:** The study finding has significant implications for public and private sector managers and policy makers. To counter the adverse effects of ethnic diversity and to bring inclusiveness and harmony to the workplace, managers must have training, awareness and intercultural competence. The organizational culture of Pakistani organizations required to be more sensitive towards ethnic diversity by embracing, valuing and leveraging it vis-à-vis open communication.

**Keyword:** Diversity, Ethnic Diversity, Interpersonal Conflict.

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

The cultural evolution towards globalization has resulted in a more diverse workforce composed of individuals with varying ideologies, customs, norms, philosophies, and personalities (Hennekam et al., 2019; Aiswarya *et al.*, 2024).). For contemporary managers, fostering cohesion among team members has become increasingly challenging as conflicts are an unavoidable aspect of workplace dynamics (Freeman & Lindsay, 2012; Alagarsamy et al., 2024). Workforce diversity refers to the demographic and cultural differences among employees within an organization (Ravazzani, 2016). In today's interconnected global environment, diversity has reshaped organizational behavior and perceptions. Modern enterprises do not merely adopt diversity to meet legal requirements but also leverage it as a strategic tool for organizational and employee development (Dinesen & Sønderskov, 2018). The alignment of organizational goals with diversity initiatives promotes innovation, enhances problem-solving capabilities, improves perceptions of fairness and legitimacy, and increases employee satisfaction (Roberson, 2019). However, if not effectively managed, diversity can also lead to negative consequences (Laurence et al., 2018). Effective diversity management requires a deep understanding of its multifaceted nature (Trenerry & Paradies, 2012). Among the various dimensions of diversity, ethnic diversity plays a significant role in shaping interpersonal conflict at work (IPCW), which is the focus of this research.

Ethnicity represents a fundamental element that shapes group dynamics within the workplace. Ethnic diversity refers to the heterogeneity of work teams based on differences in native language, race, religion, and cultural background (Leslie, 2017; Alesina & La Ferrara, 2005; Zhang, & Kommol, 2024). It is typically operationalized by considering employees' country or region of origin, which introduces a diverse range of norms, knowledge, and skillsets into the organization (Lazear, 1999; Morgan & Vardy, 2009; Jansson & Bursell, 2018). According to Tajfel and Turner's (1979) social identity theory, individuals categorize themselves and others into various social groups, such as ethnicity, religion, and gender. Through social comparison, individuals develop their social identity based on group affiliation. This process fosters in-group favoritism, where in-group members are perceived positively, while out-group members are viewed negatively (Pitts & Jarry, 2007). Consequently, such mental categorization can lead to communication breakdowns, reduced trust, and a lack of cooperation in ethnically diverse work environments, ultimately diminishing organizational productivity (Dinesen & Sønderskov, 2018).

Pakistan is inherently ethnically diverse, consisting of seven major ethnic groups—Punjabis, Pashtuns, Sindhis, Baloch, Muhajirs, Saraikis, and Hindkowans—along with numerous smaller groups (Majeed, 2010). This extensive ethnic diversity is reflected in the workforce, particularly in metropolitan cities and nationwide organizations. Public sector organizations, in particular, exhibit pronounced ethnic diversity due to the government's strict enforcement of employment quotas (Channar, Abbassi, & Ujan, 2011). The universities located in Islamabad and Rawalpindi are no exception, with significant levels of ethnic diversity among their staff.

Idrees et al., (2013) conducted a comprehensive review of prior research on workforce diversity in Pakistan and found that no study has specifically examined the influence of ethnic diversity on IPCW. The present study is aimed at fulfilling this gap by exploring how ethnic diversity influences interpersonal conflict at work. It also adds to the body of knowledge on ethnic diversity and IPCW by providing evidence from Pakistan which is ethnically a rich country. This research also offers practical insights into managing adverse effects of ethnic diversity in form of IPCW, since diversity can act as a double-edged sword, that is, enhancing organizational performance when managed well or hindering it through conflict when mismanaged (Mujtaba, 2013).

The current research is significant as it addresses a critical aspect of workplace, that is, implications of ethnic diversity on IPCW in Pakistan, which is highly culturally diverse country. An understanding of how ethnic diversity influences interpersonal conflicts will be instrumental for Pakistani organizations to devise policies which can make workplace inclusive and harmonious. Furthermore, the organizations can use insights to their employees' well-being, productivity, and overall organizational performance. This

research enriches the academic discourse on diversity and conflict management by adding empirical evidence from a place which is located at an ethnic crossroads. Lastly, the findings can inform policymakers about best practices for managing ethnic diversity to achieve social cohesion and economic development in Pakistan.

## **2. LITERATURE REVIEW**

In 21<sup>st</sup> century organizations, diversity is an intrinsic component and it is effecting organizational dynamics both positively and negatively (Ravazzani, 2016). Modern organizations are not inculcating diversity due to legal requirements, for being political correct, or adhere to the social norms, but to reach the economic benefits of fostering diversity (Hennekam et al., 2019). These benefits include enhancing customer focus, attracting top talent, reducing employee turnover, and retaining skilled workers by cultivating a sense of belonging through diversity initiatives (Rodriguez et al., 2016). Legitimacy is another motive for promoting diversity in organizations (Hennekam et al., 2019).

Scholars (Jansson & Bursell, 2018; Leslie, 2017; Hanson & Pratt, 2003; Roberson, 2019) have extensively examined the impact of diversity on organizational performance. A recurring question in their investigations is whether diversity enhances performance. Research conducted by Ikon and Okolie-Osemene (2017) and Roberson (2019) provides a straightforward answer: 'Yes.' However, rather than delving into the broader debate of 'how' and 'why,' this study focuses on a specific aspect of diversity—ethnic diversity—and its influence on interpersonal conflicts in the workplace.

Historically, the term 'diversity' was initially associated with minority employment and affirmative action (Ilmakunnas & Ilmakunnas, 2011; Idrees et al., 2013). However, the concept has since evolved to encompass a wide array of factors beyond these initial dimensions. A comprehensive review of the literature on workforce diversity reveals that while the notion is not new, its significance has grown over time (Peters, April, Shockley, & Dhamija, 2007; Pringle & Ryan, 2015; Roberson, 2019). Workforce diversity encompasses the multitude of similarities and differences among employees. Effective management of diversity requires a holistic approach, starting from creating a diverse workforce to fostering an environment that values and respects these differences. Organizations can address their employees' needs by developing an inclusive organizational culture through strategic diversity management (Jayne & Dipboye, 2004; Parrotta et al., 2016). From a strategic human resource perspective, filling organizational roles with diverse talent is critical to achieving desired performance outcomes. A diverse workforce often brings innovative problem-solving skills and enhances creativity (Laurence et al., 2018). Nonetheless, merely assembling a diverse team does not guarantee positive outcomes; effective management is essential for realizing these potential benefits (Ravazzani, 2016; Jayne & Dipboye, 2004).

Differences in age, culture, abilities, race, religion, and gender contribute to workforce diversity in both public and private sectors in Pakistan (Majeed, 2010). Various factors, including globalization, national cultures, and generational differences, are reshaping workplace dynamics globally, and Pakistan is no exception. The country's workforce reflects a rich tapestry of cultural diversity, with expatriates further enhancing this mix (Idrees et al., 2013). Cultural backgrounds significantly influence individual attitudes and behaviors, resulting in a broad spectrum of workplace interactions. While fostering diversity is relatively straightforward, managing it effectively poses significant challenges (Freeman & Lindsay, 2012; David & Elizabeth, 2007). Consequently, managing workforce diversity has become a priority for managers across all sectors—public, private, and non-profit (Dinesen & Sønderskov, 2018). The primary focus is to safeguard employees' interests and ensure non-discriminatory practices. Legal frameworks in various countries, including Pakistan, reinforce the importance of promoting equality and discouraging discrimination (Idrees et al., 2013). Research suggests that organizations that prioritize effective diversity management are more likely to succeed (Trenerry & Paradies, 2012).

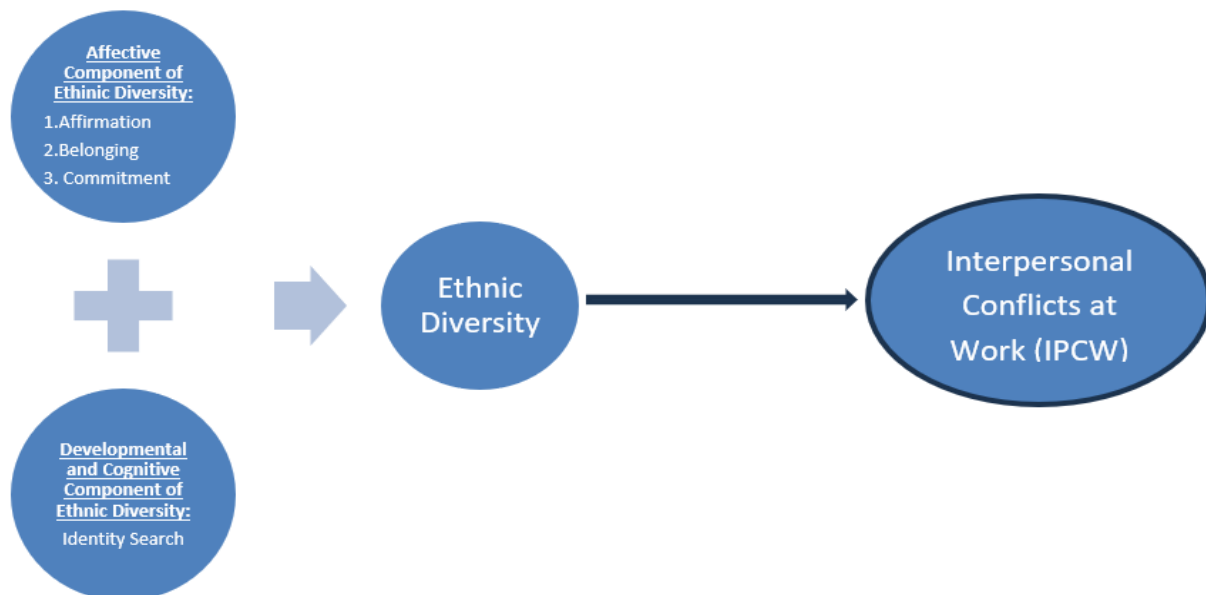
Ethnic diversity is a key dimension of workforce heterogeneity, encompassing differences in native language, race, religion, and cultural practices (Alesina & La Ferrara, 2005). This form of diversity is

typically measured by an individual's country or region of origin, which brings distinct norms, knowledge, and skills to the organization (Lazear, 1999; Morgan & Vardy, 2009). Organizations must hire people from a variety of ethnic backgrounds in a world that is becoming more interconnected and where migration and mobility are commonplace. This is particularly evident in multinational corporations and firms operating in metropolitan areas. Ethnic diversity thus becomes a significant factor contributing to organizational heterogeneity (Alesina & La Ferrara, 2005; Lazear, 1999). While ethnic diversity can enhance creativity and innovation by pooling diverse skills and perspectives, it can also pose challenges in communication and management (Lazear, 1999; Morgan & Vardy, 2009). For instance, a study by Dincer and Wang (2011) found that excessive heterogeneity could reduce China's growth rate by 2%.

Pakistan is a highly diverse country with seven major ethnic groups—Punjabis, Pashtuns, Sindhis, Baloch, Urdu-speaking/Muhajirs, Saraikis, and Hindkowans—and numerous smaller communities. This diversity is reflected in national organizations, particularly in the public sector, where hiring is influenced by a quota system at federal and provincial levels. A review by Idrees et al. (2013) highlights the lack of research on the impact of ethnic diversity on interpersonal conflicts in the workplace.

Conflict is generally defined as a divergence in perceptions, goals, or interpersonal expectations among parties involved (Boulding, 1963). Mack and Snyder (1957) describe conflict as a social process involving parties with incompatible values. The term encompasses various levels of disputes, from individual to group conflicts (Deutsch, 1990; Thomas, 1992b). Interpersonal conflict specifically refers to disagreements between individuals with conflicting goals (Oetzel & Ting-Toomey, 2003). According to Barki and Hartwick (2004), interpersonal conflict arises when three key elements are present: disagreement, interference, and negative emotions.

Conflicts are likely to emerge in settings where individuals with diverse ethnicities, backgrounds, and ideas interact. Despite Pakistan's rich diversity, there is limited understanding and management of workforce diversity, which often leads to conflict rather than positive outcomes. Both public and private sector organizations have historically overlooked this issue, though recent developments indicate a growing interest in leveraging diversity for improved productivity (Idrees et al., 2013). Interpersonal conflict is a complex phenomenon that can occur when personal and situational factors align unfavorably (e.g., Fink, 1968; Pondy, 1967; Thomas, 1992a; Wall & Callister, 1995).



**Table 1: Research Model**

### 3. METHODOLOGY

Data were collected from employees working in both public and private sector universities located in Islamabad and Rawalpindi. Participants were categorized into two main groups: academic staff and administrative staff. A proportionate random sampling method was employed to select the sample. In total, there were 24 universities in these two cities, comprising 10 private and 14 public sector universities (HEC, 2018). A structured, closed-ended questionnaire was used for data collection, divided into three distinct sections. The first two sections contained previously established measures of ethnic diversity and IPCW, while the final section gathered information on control variables relevant to the study. Most questionnaires were distributed and collected in person, whereas respondents from remote locations were contacted via email. Out of 350 distributed questionnaires, 210 were returned, resulting in a response rate of 60%. However, 10 incomplete questionnaires were excluded, leaving a final sample size of 200 respondents for hypothesis testing.

#### 3.1 Control Variables

Based on prior research linking gender, age, and work experience with IPCW, these variables were included as controls in the analysis. The control variables were coded as follows: gender (male=0, female=1); age was divided into four categories: 18-30 years=1, 31-40 years=2, 41-50 years=3, and above 50 years=4. Similarly, work experience was categorized into four groups: up to 5 years=1, between 6-10 years=2, between 11-20 years=3, and more than 20 years=4.

#### 3.2 Measures

Both the independent and dependent variables were assessed using previously validated instruments. Participant responses were recorded on 4-point and 5-point Likert scales. The ethnic diversity scale ranged from strongly disagree (1) to strongly agree (5), while IPCW was measured using a 4-point scale with anchors ranging from strongly disagree (1) to strongly agree (4).

##### 3.2.1 Ethnic Diversity Scale

The concept of "ethnic diversity" was measured using the Multi-group Ethnic Identity Measure (MEIM) developed by Phinney (1992). This scale encompasses two primary dimensions: "ethnic identity search," which includes developmental and cognitive components, and the "affective component," which measures affirmation, belonging, and commitment. The scale comprises 12 items, including statements such as, "*I am active in organizations or social groups that include mostly members of my own ethnic group*" and "*I think a lot about how my life will be affected by my ethnic group membership*." Reliability analysis produced a Cronbach's alpha of 0.79. Construct validity was ensured by conducting confirmatory factor analysis (CFA), where the factor loading for all items remained over 0.5.

##### 3.2.2 Interpersonal Conflict at Work (IPCW) Scale

Interpersonal conflict at work was examined using a scale established by Spector and Jex (1998), consisting of four items. Sample items include, "*How often do other people yell at you at work?*" and "*How often do other people do nasty things to you at work?*" The scale demonstrated high reliability, with a Cronbach's alpha of 0.88. CFA was used to demonstrate construct validity, and all items had factor loadings greater than 0.5, indicating that the scale was appropriate for this investigation.

### 4. DATA ANALYSIS AND RESULTS

The acquired data were examined using SPSS software by utilizing statistical approaches, including correlation analysis and hierarchical regression. Important assumptions like normality, linearity, heteroscedasticity, and multicollinearity were evaluated through a number of diagnostic tests before the hierarchical regression analysis was carried out (Poon, 2004). The results demonstrated no breaches of these assumptions, with variance inflation factors (VIF) better than 0.1 and a Durbin-Watson statistic of 1.733, validating the suitability of the regression model. In the hierarchical regression process, control

variables-gender, age, and work experience-were introduced in the first step, followed by the main independent variable, ethnic diversity, in the second step.

To address the issue of potential common method bias, Harman's single-factor test was conducted (Podsakoff & Organ, 1986). The analysis revealed no dominant factor that could account for the majority of the variance, as the first factor explained only 21% of the total variance, well below the threshold indicating bias. Consequently, it was concluded that common method variance did not significantly affect the results.

Table 1: *Descriptive Statistics*

<b>Ethnic ID</b>	<b>Mean</b>	<b>N</b>	<b>Std. Deviation</b>
<i>Punjabis</i>	2.82	101	0.96
<i>Pashtuns,</i>	2.72	29	0.63
<i>Sindhis</i>	2.89	13	0.34
<i>Baloch</i>	2.53	13	0.76
<i>Urdu-speaking/Muhajirs</i>	3.26	19	1.03
<i>Saraikis,</i>	3.75	10	0.72
<i>Hindkowans</i>	3.01	12	1.09
<i>Others</i>	2.62	3	1.50
Total	2.86	200	0.94
<b>Gender</b>			
<i>Males</i>	2.97	104	0.85
<i>Females</i>	2.68	96	1.03
Total	2.85	200	0.94
<b>University</b>			
Public Sector	3.01	14	1.09
Private Sector	2.62	10	1.50
<b>Age</b>			
18-30	2.42	116	0.63
31-40	1.89	44	0.34
41-50	1.43	26	0.76
Above 50	1.86	14	0.34
<b>Work Experience</b>			
Less than 5 years	2.97	88	0.85
5-10	2.68	52	1.03
10-20	1.85	36	0.94
Above 20	2.42	24	0.63

The descriptive statistics reveal that the Punjabi ethnic identity was the most dominant, while the Baloch ethnic identity was the least represented. This distribution aligns with the demographic composition of the country, where Punjab is the most populous province, and Balochistan has the smallest population. Out of a total of 200 participants, 104 (52%) were male, and 96 (48%) were female. Additionally, 58% of the respondents were employed in public sector universities, while 42% were from private sector universities. The mean age of the participants falls within the first age category (18 to 30 years), with 58% of the respondents belonging to this group. The mean work experience of 1.8 indicates that the majority of participants had less than 10 years of professional experience.

Table 2: *Correlation Test*

Variables	M	SD	1	2	3	4	5
Gender	2.8		1				
Age	1.72		0.21	1			
Work Experience	0.44		0.25**	0.59**	1		
Ethnic Diversity	1.82		0.04	0.08	0.01	1	
IC	3.27		0.27**	0.08	0.08	0.50**	1

\*\*. Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level. (2- Tailed)

Table 2 presents the correlation results for the variables under study. The control variable, gender, shows a positive and statistically significant correlation with IPCW ( $r = 0.27$ ,  $p < 0.05$  and  $r = 0.50$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ), indicating that employees encounter challenges such as negative attitudes, biased perceptions, and prejudice linked to their ethnicity. In contrast, the second control variable, age, does not exhibit a significant correlation with IPCW. Similarly, the third control variable, work experience, also shows no substantial relationship with IPCW.

Table 3: *Regression Results*

	Model 1			Model 2			F	R <sup>2</sup>	$\Delta R^2$
Variables	$\beta$	SE	Sig.	B	SE	Sig.			
<i>Step 1 Control Variables</i>									
Age	0.05	0.10	0.95	0.91	0.88	0.26	<b>0.18</b>	<b>.025</b>	
Gender	-0.13	0.07	0.06	-0.12	0.06	0.04			
Work Experience	0.04	0.10	0.64	0.08	0.87	0.92			
<i>Step 2 Main effect Variables</i>									
Ethnic Diversity				0.50	0.06	0.00	<b>0.00</b>	<b>0.27</b>	<b>0.251</b>

Table 3 displays the results of the regression analysis. In Model 1, the control variables (gender, work experience, and age) were incorporated, while in Model 2, ethnic diversity was added as an independent variable, controlling for the effects of gender, work experience, and age.

Model 2 yielded an  $R^2$  value of 0.27 with a p-value of 0.00 at  $p < 0.05$ , indicating that a one-unit increase in ethnic diversity accounts for a 27% variation in IPCW. Among the control variables, only gender showed a significant effect on IPCW, with  $\beta = -0.12$  and a p-value of 0.04. In contrast, work experience and age were not significantly associated with IPCW, showing p-values of 0.26 and 0.92, respectively. The  $R^2$  value increased from 0.25 to 0.27 ( $\Delta R^2 = 0.02$ ) upon adding ethnic diversity to the model. The  $\beta$  coefficient for ethnic diversity was 0.50 with a p-value of 0.00, supporting the hypothesis that ethnic diversity is related to IPCW.

The overall model fit was confirmed by a significant p-value of 0.00, leading to the conclusion that ethnic diversity contributes substantially to IPCW among staff and faculty. Although ethnic diversity is a key determinant of interpersonal conflict, other factors may also play a role. Based on the findings, ethnic diversity is identified as a major factor influencing IPCW, with conflicts being more likely among male employees, as indicated by the negative beta value for gender.

## 5. DISCUSSION

The study results with a  $R^2$  value of 0.27 together with a p-value of 0.00 at  $p < 0.05$  point out that ethnic diversity has a significant impact on IPCW among employees of universities situated in Islamabad and Rawalpindi. This significant relationship between ethnic diversity and IPCW indicates the challenges that ethnic diversity can pose in the workplace. This is consistent with research of Fakthong (2021) that suggests ethnic diversity associated with workplace trust which can manifest in interpersonal conflicts due to differences in cultural norms, communication styles, and expectations.

The significant relationship ( $p = 0.04$ ) of control variable of gender with IPCW reflects that male employees with diverse ethnic background are more prone to IPCW as compared to their female counterparts. Such gender difference can be attributed to comparatively more active role of males in Pakistani society and at workplace together with varying negotiation and conflict management styles (Abbasi et al., 2018). Furthermore, the non-significant relationship between ethnic diversity and IPCW across different age groups and levels of work experience indicates that these conflicts are pervasive and not limited to specific demographic segments (Yeung et al., 2015).

The study finding has significant implications for public and private sector managers and policy makers. To counter the adverse effects of ethnic diversity and to bring inclusiveness and harmony to the workplace, managers must have intercultural competence. The employees and managers can be equipped to understand, embrace and leverage ethnic diversity through participation in various diversity training programs. Moreover, IPCW can be reduced, and workplace cohesion can be enhanced by making diversity and open communication an important pillar of organizational culture.

This study adds to the body of knowledge on ethnic diversity and IPCW by providing empirical evidence from Pakistan. Future researchers should propose specific and specialized interventions to manage the ethnic diversity in organizations and introduce mechanisms to gauge the effectiveness of the mechanisms.

## **6. CONCLUSION**

The results of the study highlight a number of important facets of ethnic diversity that may lead to interpersonal disputes at work. The results highlight a critical underlying cause of IPCW, offering valuable insights for managers to better comprehend and manage diverse work environments. In particular, the analysis shows that faculty and staff members from different ethnic backgrounds frequently have different ideas about roles and responsibilities, which makes them more likely to disagree with one another and eventually cause conflicts at work. Therefore, in order to promote a healthy work environment, modern managers are encouraged to take proactive steps to properly tackle this potential cause of conflict.

Men are more prone than women to have interpersonal problems, according to the control variable gender's negative beta coefficient. For managers who are in charge of gender-diverse teams, this finding is extremely pertinent. Those managing a workforce predominantly composed of men from different ethnic groups should exercise greater vigilance regarding IPCW. On the other hand, the study's findings indicate that there is no meaningful correlation between IPCW's age and the control variables of work experience. These findings prompt further research to explore why certain factors, such as gender, influence IPCW while others, like experience and age, do not. Future research could broaden the focus by gathering information from multiple industries, which might provide fresh viewpoints.

The study has applications for managers overseeing ethnically diverse teams at all organizational levels and in various industries. When it comes to handling workplace dynamics, these managers need to be more cautious. As the findings indicate, failure to embrace and wisely manage ethnic diversity could exacerbate IPCW, which may negatively affect overall organizational performance. Managers should take a proactive approach in light of these findings by putting preventative measures and strategies into place to lessen IPCW rather than just avoid it. Additionally, should conflicts arise, managers must be equipped with reactive strategies to address and resolve issues promptly. Recognizing ethnic variety and resolving disputes in an unbiased manner devoid of bias or partiality are necessary for this.



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## Conflict of Interest


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