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Happy Talk: Is Common Diversity Rhetoric Effective Diversity Rhetoric?

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Abstract:	Despite their prevalence, diversity initiatives do not necessarily motivate employees to facilitate diversity goals. We advance understanding of diversity rhetoric—defined as how leaders talk about diversity and its effects—as a tool for motivating employees to foster diversity and inclusion. Prior work investigates rhetoric that emphasizes diversity in organizations is necessarily beneficial (value-in-diversity rhetoric), which is puzzling given the reality that diversity can have positive or negative consequences. We introduce the construct of contingent-diversity rhetoric, which emphasizes diversity is beneficial if its challenges are overcome, and thus captures the reality of diversity's effects. Drawing from the psychology of the self, we theorize leaders use contingent-diversity rhetoric less commonly than value-in-diversity rhetoric, due to fear of appearing prejudiced. Drawing from the psychology of employee motivation, we theorize contingent-diversity rhetoric results in more diversity effort among employees than value-in-diversity rhetoric does because it increases perceptions that diversity goals are difficult to achieve. Four multi-method studies support the proposed descriptive-prescriptive paradox: contingent-diversity rhetoric is descriptively less common, but prescriptively more effective, than value-in-diversity rhetoric is. Our research advances theory on fostering diversity and inclusion in organizations and suggests leaders can increase employees' diversity effort by changing the way they talk about diversity.

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HAPPY TALK:
IS COMMON DIVERSITY RHETORIC EFFECTIVE DIVERSITY RHETORIC?

ABSTRACT

Despite their prevalence, diversity initiatives do not necessarily motivate employees to facilitate diversity goals. We advance understanding of diversity rhetoric—defined as how leaders talk about diversity and its effects—as a tool for motivating employees to foster diversity and inclusion. Prior work investigates rhetoric that emphasizes diversity in organizations is necessarily beneficial (value-in-diversity rhetoric), which is puzzling given the reality that diversity can have positive or negative consequences. We introduce the construct of contingent-diversity rhetoric, which emphasizes diversity is beneficial if its challenges are overcome, and thus captures the reality of diversity's effects. Drawing from the psychology of the self, we theorize leaders use contingent-diversity rhetoric less commonly than value-in-diversity rhetoric, due to fear of appearing prejudiced. Drawing from the psychology of employee motivation, we theorize contingent-diversity rhetoric results in more diversity effort among employees than value-in-diversity rhetoric does because it increases perceptions that diversity goals are difficult to achieve. Four multi-method studies support the proposed descriptive-prescriptive paradox: contingent-diversity rhetoric is descriptively less common, but prescriptively more effective, than value-in-diversity rhetoric is. Our research advances theory on fostering diversity and inclusion in organizations and suggests leaders can increase employees' diversity effort by changing the way they talk about diversity.

Diversity initiatives are common, but do not necessarily help organizations become more diverse and inclusive. Rather, diversity initiatives at times have no effect—or even a negative effect—on diversity (e.g., Kalev, Dobbin, & Kelly, 2006). A dominant explanation for their limited effectiveness is that diversity initiatives often fail to motivate employees to facilitate diversity and inclusion and can even produce undermining effects, such as increased discrimination against minority groups (Leslie, 2019; Nishii, Khattab, Shemla, & Paluch, 2018). Thus, research is needed on additional strategies for motivating employees to foster diversity and inclusion and thereby helping organizations achieve their diversity goals.

To this end, scholars have investigated whether leaders can motivate employees to foster diversity by using certain types of rhetoric to justify diversity initiatives. This body of work focuses on rhetoric that emphasizes diversity is valuable and finds this rhetoric type is commonly used by leaders (e.g., Edelman, Fuller, & Mara-Drita, 2001) and often evokes desirable reactions

among employees, such as decreased discrimination and increased support for diversity initiatives (e.g., Kidder, Lankau, Chrobot-Mason, Mollica, & Friedman, 2004; Wilton, Good, Moss-Racusin, & Sanchez, 2015), with some caveats (e.g., Georgeac & Rattan, 2023).

Despite evidence that rhetoric emphasizing diversity's value is common and often effective, prior focus on this rhetoric type is puzzling because it is disconnected from the reality of diversity's effects (Eagly, 2016). Scholars have investigated the consequences of increased diversity in organizations and found it has positive effects in some settings, but negative effects in others (e.g., Joshi & Roh, 2009). Thus, in contrast to the content of the rhetoric that is the focus of prior work, diversity is not necessarily beneficial; rather, benefitting from diversity requires creating the conditions needed to overcome its challenges.

The disconnect between scholars' focus on rhetoric that emphasizes diversity is necessarily beneficial and the reality that diversity can be either beneficial or challenging, raises questions regarding whether leaders integrate the challenges of diversity into their rhetoric and to what effect. On the one hand, it is intuitive that emphasizing diversity's benefits will motivate employees to foster diversity and that emphasizing its challenges may have the opposite effect. As a result, rhetoric that acknowledges diversity's challenges may be both uncommon and ineffective. On the other hand, theories of motivation suggest difficult goals result in more goal-directed effort and higher performance than easy goals do (e.g., Locke & Latham, 2002). Thus, even if uncommon, rhetoric that emphasizes benefiting from diversity requires overcoming its challenges, and thereby implies diversity goals are difficult to achieve, may be more effective than rhetoric that emphasizes diversity's benefits only. Because scholars have yet to investigate rhetoric that acknowledges diversity's challenges, answers to these questions remain unknown.

We seek to advance the diversity literature by investigating a new rhetoric type. We

introduce the construct of contingent-diversity rhetoric (contingent rhetoric), which emphasizes diversity is beneficial if its challenges are overcome and thus captures the reality of diversity's effects. We compare contingent rhetoric to value-in-diversity rhetoric (value rhetoric), which emphasizes diversity is necessarily beneficial and is the focus of prior work. Specifically, we integrate the psychology of the self with the psychology of employee motivation to derive the prediction that contingent rhetoric is less common, but more effective, than value rhetoric is.

We first draw from the psychology of the self and theorize leaders are less likely to use contingent than value rhetoric. The desire to present the self favorably is a fundamental motive (e.g., Banaji & Prentice, 1994). One manifestation of this motive is speakers' tendency to emphasize positive information, but omit negative information, both in general and when talking about diversity in particular—a phenomenon dubbed "happy talk" (Bell & Hartmann, 2007; Bergsieker, Leslie, Constantine, & Fiske, 2012). Building on the happy talk phenomenon, we theorize leaders are hesitant to acknowledge the challenges of diversity, due to fear of appearing prejudiced, with the result that contingent rhetoric is less common than value rhetoric is.

Although likely to explain which rhetoric type leaders use, self-presentation concerns are less likely to explain which type is more effective for motivating diversity effort (i.e., whether employees take action to foster diversity and inclusion). We therefore use different theories to understand the effectiveness of contingent and value rhetoric. Our primary focus is which type is more effective; however, contingent and value rhetoric are similar in that both emphasize diversity is beneficial and prior work indicates emphasizing diversity's benefits is often effective (e.g., Kidder et al., 2004). We therefore begin with the baseline prediction that both rhetoric types increase diversity effort overall and use the persuasion literature to identify perceptions that there are strong arguments in favor of diversity as an underlying mechanism. Contingent and

value rhetoric also differ in that only contingent rhetoric emphasizes benefitting from diversity requires overcoming challenges. Theories of motivation—and specifically goal setting theory—suggest employees put more effort into goals that are difficult than goals that are easy (Locke & Latham, 2019). Building on this literature, we theorize contingent rhetoric leads to more diversity effort than value rhetoric does by because it increases perceptions that diversity goals are difficult to achieve.

Our theorizing collectively suggests leaders' diversity rhetoric is characterized by a descriptive-prescriptive paradox: contingent rhetoric is descriptively less common, but prescriptively more effective, than value rhetoric is. We test the proposed paradox in an archival study (Study 1), two experiments (Studies 2 & 3), and a survey study (Study 4).

Our research advances the diversity literature in several ways. We introduce a new construct—contingent rhetoric—and theorize it is paradoxically less common, but more effective, than value rhetoric, which is the focus of prior work. In doing so, we advance theory by demonstrating that extant scholarship is underspecified, in that it accounts for only a subset of the rhetoric types leaders use, and also by challenging the implicit assumption that value rhetoric is the most effective rhetoric type. Beyond demonstrating a descriptive-prescriptive paradox, we provide insight into the psychological mechanisms that explain it. In doing so, we advance theory on why leaders use certain rhetoric types by identifying self-presentation concerns, and specifically fear of appearing prejudiced, as a motive that explains why leaders are hesitant to use contingent rhetoric. Similarly, we advance theory on the factors that motivate employees to foster diversity by identifying argument strength and goal difficulty as mechanisms that explain the effects of leaders' diversity rhetoric on employees' diversity effort. Finally, from a practical standpoint, our work suggests leaders can increase employees' diversity effort, and thereby help

organizations become more diverse and inclusive, by changing the way they talk about diversity.

BACKGROUND: DIVERSITY RHETORIC VERSUS REALITY

Managerial rhetoric is the language leaders use to articulate assumptions about and rationalize organizational goals and objectives (Abrahamson, 1996; 1997; Barley & Kunda, 1992). Consistent with this broader construct, diversity rhetoric is defined as how leaders talk about diversity and its effects when justifying diversity initiatives (Edelman et al., 2001). Diversity rhetoric became common in the 1980s and most often emphasizes diversity is valuable, in that it benefits the organization and its members (Eagly, 2016; Kelly & Dobbin, 1998).

Scholars have investigated if rhetoric that emphasizes diversity's value is effective, in that it increases employee attitudes and behaviors that foster diversity and inclusion. One line of work compares rhetoric that emphasizes diversity is valuable in general (pro-diversity or multicultural messages) to no rhetoric or rhetoric that emphasizes diversity is inconsequential (colorblind messages; e.g., Apfelbaum, Pauker, Sommers, & Ambady, 2010). A second line of work compares rhetoric that emphasizes diversity is valuable for different reasons, including the business case (diversity enhances performance) and the moral case (diversity is ethical; e.g., Richard, Fubara, Castillo, 2000). Emphasizing that diversity is valuable—in general, for business reasons, or for moral reasons—tends to increase employee attitudes and behaviors that foster diversity, including decreased discrimination, increased support for diversity, and engagement among minority groups (Apfelbaum et al., 2010; Apfelbaum, Stephens, & Reagans, 2016; Dover, Major, & Kaiser, 2016; Harrison, Kravitz, Mayer, Leslie, & Lev-Arey, 2006; Purdie-Vaughns, Steele, Davies, Ditlmann, & Crosby, 2008; Richard et al., 2000; Wilton et al., 2015). Moreover, although the business case is more common than the moral case, neither is consistently more effective; rather, whether the business or moral case evokes more favorable reactions depends on individual differences and contextual features (e.g., Jansen, Kröger, Van der Toorn, & Ellemers,

2021; Starck, Sinclair, & Shelton, 2021; Williamson, Slay, Shapiro, & Shivers-Blackwell, 2008).

Notably, there are some caveats to the conclusion that emphasizing diversity's value is effective. This rhetoric type at times has null effects (Dover, Major, Kaiser, 2021; Kirby & Kaiser, 2021) or even undesirable effects, such as increased denial of discrimination and perceived disadvantage among majority groups (Kaiser et al., 2013; Plaut, Garnett, Buffardi, & Sanchez-Burks, 2011) and disengagement among minority groups (Apfelbaum et al., 2016; Georgeac & Rattan, 2023). Nevertheless, the preponderance of evidence indicates employees tend to react favorably to rhetoric that emphasizes diversity's value.

Despite evidence that rhetoric emphasizing diversity's value is both common and often effective, scholars' focus on this rhetoric type is surprising because it is disconnected from the reality of diversity's effects (Eagly, 2016). Scholars have investigated the effects of diversity by comparing outcomes in diverse versus homogeneous work units. Research on the business case finds diversity improves information elaboration and decision making and thus enhances performance in some settings, but increases conflict and tension and thus reduces performance in others (e.g., Joshi & Roh, 2009; van Knippenberg & Schippers, 2007). Likewise, research on the moral case finds diversity is viewed as ethical and evokes positive attitudes in some settings (Kim & Phillips, 2019; Ruttan & Nordgren, 2021), but is perceived as unfair and evokes negative attitudes in others (James, Brief, Dietz, & Cohen, 2001; Shteynberg, Leslie, Knight, & Mayer, 2011). Thus, diversity is not necessarily valuable; rather, the benefits of diversity are only achieved if leaders create the conditions needed to overcome its challenges, for example by fostering collectivistic norms (Chatman, Polzer, Barsade, & Neale, 1998), an integration-and-learning diversity perspective (Ely & Thomas, 2001), or an inclusive climate (Nishii, 2013).

The reality that diversity can be either beneficial or challenging raises questions

regarding whether leaders integrate the challenges of diversity into their rhetoric and to what effect. We provide insight into these questions by investigating a new rhetoric type.

THEORY DEVELOPMENT: CONTINGENT VERSUS VALUE RHETORIC

We introduce the construct of contingent-diversity rhetoric (i.e., contingent rhetoric), which we define as rhetoric that emphasizes diversity in organizations is beneficial if the challenges are overcome. Contingent rhetoric is grounded in the reality that diversity can be beneficial or challenging (e.g., Joshi & Roh, 2009; van Knippenberg & Schippers, 2007), but has yet to receive scholarly attention. We compare contingent rhetoric to value-in-diversity rhetoric (i.e., value rhetoric), which is defined as rhetoric that emphasizes diversity in organizations is beneficial and is the focus of prior work (e.g., Richard et al., 2000).

We define both rhetoric types to encompass rhetoric that emphasizes diversity is beneficial (if the challenges are overcome) for any reason (e.g., in general, business reasons, moral reasons). We do so because limiting rhetoric to a specific reason why diversity is beneficial does not consistently increase its effectiveness (e.g., Williamson et al., 2008). Moreover, whereas prior work compares different value rhetoric types to each other, we compare value rhetoric to a new rhetoric type. Because we are the first to compare contingent and value rhetoric, we define both broadly. We also define contingent and value rhetoric to include rhetoric that is written or spoken, which is consistent with prior work on leader rhetoric (Carton, Murphy, & Clark, 2014; Emrich, Brower, Feldman, & Garland, 2001). Finally, we define contingent and value rhetoric to include rhetoric from leaders at any level, which is consistent with definitions of leaders. Leaders are those with the authority to shape others' behavior toward shared goals (e.g., Carton, 2022; Pfeffer, 1977), and thus include both senior and lower-level leaders.

We build theory regarding which diversity rhetoric type leaders use more commonly and which is more effective for increasing employees' diversity effort. Drawing from definitions of

general work effort (Van Iddekinge, Arnold, Aguinis, Lang, Lievens, 2023), we define diversity effort as the extent to which employees take action to foster diversity and inclusion with intensity and persistence. Diversity effort therefore encompasses a range of specific behaviors, such as avoiding discrimination, supporting minority groups, or helping to develop diversity initiatives. We use diversity effort as an indicator of effectiveness because organizations are more likely to achieve diversity goals when employees' diversity effort is higher. Our focus on diversity effort is consistent with prior work, which uses attitudes (e.g., diversity initiative support) and specific behaviors (e.g., reporting discrimination) that foster diversity as indicators of diversity rhetoric effectiveness (e.g., Apfelbaum et al., 2010; Kidder et al., 2004). At the same time, we define diversity effort to include behaviors only because they are likely a stronger determinant of diversity goal progress than attitudes are. We also define diversity effort to include the full range of behaviors likely to facilitate diversity goals, instead of focusing on one specific behavior.

Common Diversity Rhetoric

The psychology of the self is likely to provide insight into whether contingent or value rhetoric is more common. The desire to maintain a positive self-view is a fundamental motive with implications for various behaviors, including self-presentation (Banaji & Prentice, 1994; Leary, 2007). Specifically, individuals present the self in ways they believe will cause others to view them favorably because doing so reinforces a positive sense of self (Banaji & Prentice, 1994; Schlenker & Weigold, 1992). One self-presentation strategy individuals use is negativity omission, defined as the tendency to emphasize positive information, but omit negative information, when speaking to audiences (e.g., Bergsieker et al., 2012). Audiences interpret a speaker's willingness to convey negative information about other individuals or entities as evidence that the speaker lacks agreeableness and view the speaker negatively as a result (Ames, Bianchi, & Magee, 2010; Folkes & Sears, 1977). The self-presentation risks of conveying

negative information motivate individuals to avoid negative content when speaking to audiences (Bergsieker et al., 2012; Goffman, 1959).

The tendency to omit negative information applies to how speakers talk about diversity—a phenomenon dubbed "happy talk" (Bell & Hartmann, 2007). A qualitative study revealed that, when asked about their experiences with diversity, participants initially described uniformly positive experiences and only admitted to negative experiences when probed by the interviewer (Bell & Hartmann, 2007). Likewise, experimental evidence documents that speakers emphasize positive traits (e.g., high competence), but omit negative traits (e.g., low warmth), when describing outgroups (Bergsieker et al., 2012). Speakers' tendency to omit negative content when talking about diversity is likely driven by a specific self-presentation concern: fear of appearing prejudiced. Speakers who convey negative content about diversity, for example by using negative stereotypes or derogatory labels to describe outgroups, are perceived as prejudiced by audience members (Mae & Carlston, 2005; Simon & Greenberg, 1996). Given that social norms proscribe the expression of prejudice (e.g., Crandall & Eshelman, 2003), the desire to present the self favorably likely motivates speakers to avoid negative diversity-related content.

The happy talk phenomenon provides a basis for the prediction that leaders are less likely to use contingent than value rhetoric, due to fear of appearing prejudiced. Value rhetoric emphasizes diversity is necessarily beneficial, and thus includes uniformly positive content about diversity. Alternatively, contingent rhetoric emphasizes diversity is beneficial if its challenges are overcome. Contingent rhetoric therefore includes more negative content about diversity, in that it acknowledges its potential challenges. Leaders are likely to fear employees will interpret their use of contingent rhetoric as evidence they hold negative, prejudicial attitudes about diversity, due to its comparatively negative content. Leaders are unlikely to have the same fear for value rhetoric, due to its uniformly positive content. Self-presentation concerns, including the

desire to avoid appearing prejudiced, are likely salient to leaders when they talk about diversity to their employees. Thus, to the extent that contingent rhetoric evokes higher fear of appearing prejudiced than value rhetoric does, leaders are less likely to use this rhetoric type.

The prediction that leaders are hesitant to use contingent rhetoric is grounded in evidence that speakers who convey negative diversity-related content risk being perceived as prejudiced by others; however, this work focuses on diversity-related content that is overtly negative, such as derogatory outgroup labels (e.g., Mae & Carlston, 2005). Contingent rhetoric emphasizes that benefitting from diversity requires overcoming its challenges, but does not emphasize diversity is undesirable, and thus includes negative content that is subtle more than overt. We nevertheless expect contingent rhetoric to evoke fear of appearing prejudiced, due to current social norms. Diversity and inclusion are issues of increasing societal importance, with the result that leaders face intense scrutiny regarding their stance on diversity (e.g., Avery & McKay, 2006; Chang, Milkman, Chugh, Akinola, 2019). Indeed, senior leaders often face backlash in the popular press for public statements that are perceived as prejudicial (e.g., Lee, 2014; Sebastian, 2020) and lower-level leaders are likely to face scrutiny and potential backlash from their own employees for similar statements made in private settings. High levels of scrutiny regarding diversity issues and the associated potential for backlash are likely to heighten leaders' sensitivity to the possibility of appearing prejudiced (Auger-Dominguez, 2019). It follows that leaders will avoid even subtly negative diversity-related content, including contingent rhetoric.

In all, our logic suggests leaders are less likely to use contingent than value rhetoric, due to fear of appearing prejudiced. This prediction mirrors evidence that value rhetoric is commonly used by leaders (e.g., Edelman et al., 2001). We also extend prior work by building theory regarding the prevalence of value rhetoric relative to contingent rhetoric and by identifying fear

of prejudice as a mechanism that explains which of the two rhetoric types is more common.

Hypothesis 1a: Leaders are less likely to use contingent-diversity rhetoric than value-in-diversity rhetoric.

Hypothesis 1b: The negative effect of contingent-diversity rhetoric versus value-in-diversity rhetoric on likelihood of use is mediated by fear of appearing prejudiced.

Effective Diversity Rhetoric

Self-presentation concerns are likely to explain whether contingent or value rhetoric is more common, but unlikely to explain which is more effective. The desire to present the self favorably is a fundamental human motive, but self-focus also makes individuals less attentive to and accurate in understanding others and what motivates their behavior (e.g., Jones & Nisbett, 1987; Marks & Miller, 1987). As a result, leaders are likely to overweight the possibility that contingent rhetoric causes employees to perceive them as prejudiced and underweight the possibility that their rhetoric affects employees through other mechanisms. We therefore use different frameworks to understand how continent and value rhetoric affect diversity effort.

Our primary focus is which rhetoric type is more effective; however, we first theorize contingent and value rhetoric both increase diversity effort overall (i.e., using versus not using each type increases diversity effort), due to their shared emphasis on diversity's benefits. Doing so is important for reconciling our theory with evidence that rhetoric emphasizing diversity's benefits is often effective (e.g., Richard et al., 2000) and for building comprehensive theory that accounts for how the new construct of contingent rhetoric is both similar to and different from the existing construct of value rhetoric. Establishing that contingent and value rhetoric are both effective is also important for ruling out the possibility that, even if one rhetoric type results in higher levels of diversity effort than the other, both types have a null or even negative effect on diversity effort overall. After theorizing both types are effective, due to their shared emphasis on diversity's benefits, we predict contingent rhetoric is more effective than value rhetoric is, due to

its unique emphasis on diversity's challenges.

Emphasizing diversity's benefits and perceived argument strength. Although only contingent rhetoric acknowledges diversity's challenges, contingent and value rhetoric share a common emphasis on diversity's benefits. It is intuitive that emphasizing the benefits of diversity is likely to increase diversity effort and prior work documents this rhetoric type tends to motivate employees to foster diversity (e.g., Kidder et al., 2004; Richard et al., 2000; Wilton et al., 2015). The underlying factors that drive this effect are not well understood in the diversity literature; however, research on persuasion suggests perceived argument strength is a likely mechanism.

Scholars have identified argument strength as a key driver of persuasion. In this literature, argument strength is defined as the extent to which a message generates predominantly favorable thoughts about a focal object, such as a social policy or consumer product (Petty & Cacioppo, 1979; 1986; Wagner & Petty, 2011). Although different types of messages are likely to generate favorable thoughts, and thus meet the definition of a strong argument, persuasion scholars tend to operationalize strong arguments using messages that describe the beneficial consequences of an object; such messages generate favorable thoughts by implying the object has a positive expected value (Johnson, Smith-McLallen, Killeya, & Levin, 2004; Wagner & Petty, 2011). Evidence documents that strong arguments are indeed persuasive. Favorable thoughts about an object increase individuals' support for the object in terms of their attitudes and behaviors (Petty & Briñol, 2008; Petty & Cacioppo, 1986). Notably, the extent to which strong arguments increase persuasion depends on various factors, such as the extent of message processing, mood, and pre-existing beliefs. Nevertheless, strong arguments tend to increase persuasion overall (e.g., Johnson & Eagly, 1989; Johnson et al., 2004; Petty & Cacioppo, 1979).

The persuasion literature provides a foundation for predicting that contingent and value

rhetoric both increase diversity effort among employees, relative to not using each rhetoric type, via perceptions that there are strong arguments in favor of diversity. Both rhetoric types emphasize diversity is valuable, in that it has beneficial effects in organizations. Because they make the beneficial consequences of diversity salient, contingent and value rhetoric are both likely to increase employees' perceptions that there are strong arguments in favor of diversity and generate favorable thoughts—namely, that if the organization achieves its diversity goals, positive consequences will follow. Perceptions that there are strong arguments in favor of diversity and the associated favorable thoughts are likely to persuade employees to increase their diversity effort because they provide a compelling rationale for taking action to foster diversity.

The prediction that leaders' use of contingent rhetoric and value rhetoric both increase employees' diversity effort, relative to not using each rhetoric type, is consistent with evidence that value rhetoric often motivates employees to foster diversity (e.g., Kidder et al., 2004; Richard et al., 2000; Wilton et al., 2015). We also extend prior work by theorizing that argument strength explains why value rhetoric increases diversity effort and that the same is true for contingent rhetoric, which is a new rhetoric type.

Hypothesis 2a: Leaders' use of contingent-diversity rhetoric, relative to not using this rhetoric type, has a positive effect on employees' diversity effort.

Hypothesis 2b: The positive effect of using versus not using contingent-diversity rhetoric on diversity effort is mediated by perceived argument strength.

Hypothesis 3a: Leaders' use of value-in-diversity rhetoric, relative to not using this rhetoric type, has a positive effect on employees' diversity effort.

Hypothesis 3b: The positive effect of using versus not using value-in-diversity rhetoric on diversity effort is mediated by perceived argument strength.

Emphasizing diversity's challenges and perceived goal difficulty. Despite their shared focus on the benefits of diversity, contingent and value rhetoric differ in that only contingent rhetoric acknowledges that benefitting from diversity requires overcoming challenges. Although

it is possible that acknowledging diversity's challenges will undermine employees' diversity effort, theory and research on employee motivation suggest the opposite is true. Specifically, goal setting theory provides a basis for predicting that contingent rhetoric results in more diversity effort than value rhetoric does because it implies diversity goals are difficult to achieve.

A core tenet of goal setting theory is that goal difficulty—defined as the extent to which a goal is hard versus easy to achieve—has a positive effect on goal-directed effort and performance (Locke & Latham, 2002; 2006; 2019; Locke, Shaw, Saari, & Latham, 1981). When faced with a goal that is difficult, individuals infer high levels of attention, energy, and persistence are needed to attain the goal, whereas the same is not true for a goal that is easy. Individuals therefore put more effort into achieving difficult versus easy goals, resulting in higher performance. Consistent with theory, meta-analyses document that goal difficulty has a positive effect on effort and performance (Mento, Steel, & Karren, 1987; Tubbs, 1986; Wright, 1990) and this effect has been demonstrated in a number of domains, including work, school, sports, and therapy (see Locke & Latham, 2019 for a review). Moreover, the beneficial effects of goal difficulty are robust to a variety of potential boundary conditions, including whether difficult goals are set by the self versus assigned by someone else and whether goal difficulty is objective (e.g., more tasks to complete) versus subjective (e.g., perceived difficulty; Locke & Latham, 2019; Wright, 1990). At the same time, the beneficial effects of goal difficulty are not without limits. A key boundary condition is that difficult goals must be possible to attain based on factors such as ability and resources (e.g., Locke & Latham, 2002). As a result, the effect of goal difficulty is at times curvilinear, such that overly-difficult goals reduce effort and performance (e.g., Fu, Richards, & Jones, 2009; Hyland, 1988).

Goal setting theory provides a foundation for the prediction that contingent rhetoric, but

not value rhetoric, increases diversity effort via the perceived difficulty of diversity goals. Contingent rhetoric implies benefitting from diversity is not easy in that it requires overcoming challenges. Leaders' use of contingent rhetoric is therefore likely to make salient to employees that achieving diversity and its benefits is a demanding task that requires surmounting obstacles. As a result, contingent rhetoric is likely to increase employee perceptions that diversity goals are difficult to achieve. The same is not true for value rhetoric, which emphasizes diversity is beneficial only and therefore does not imply achieving diversity and its benefits is a difficult task. It follows that leaders' use of contingent rhetoric increases the perceived difficulty of diversity goals, both relative to not using this rhetoric type and relative to using value rhetoric.

To the extent that contingent rhetoric increases the perceived difficulty of diversity goals, these perceptions are likely to, in turn, increase employees' diversity effort. If employees perceive diversity goals as difficult to achieve, it will become salient to them that significant attention, energy, and persistence are needed for goal attainment. Employees are therefore likely to engage in high levels of diversity effort because doing so is necessary for achieving diversity goals. Alternatively, if employees believe diversity goals are easy, they are less likely to see high levels of attention, energy, and persistence as necessary for goal attainment, resulting in lower levels of diversity effort. Notably, contingent rhetoric acknowledges the challenges of diversity, but also emphasizes that diversity does indeed benefit organizations as long as its challenges are overcome. Contingent rhetoric is therefore likely to result in perceptions that, although difficult, diversity goals are possible to attain and thereby prevent employees from perceiving diversity goals as overly-difficult and the associated decline in effort.

Goal setting theory provides a basis for predicting that contingent rhetoric, but not value rhetoric, increases diversity effort via the perceived difficulty of diversity goals. Yet the primary focus of goal setting research is personal, individual-level goals for which a specific person is

directly responsible (e.g., Locke & Latham, 2002; 2019). In contrast, diversity is a collective, organizational-level goal for which responsibility is diffuse. Evidence documents that individuals put less effort into collective goals than personal goals, a phenomenon referred to as social loafing (Karau & Williams, 1993; Latané, Williams, & Harkins, 1979; Liden, Wayne, Jaworski, & Bennett, 2004). Perceptions that diversity goals are difficult may be insufficient to overcome social loafing, with the result that employees engage in low levels of diversity effort, regardless of whether they perceive diversity goals as difficult versus easy to achieve.

Despite this possibility, we expect perceived diversity goal difficulty increases diversity effort by counteracting the processes that drive social loafing. One reason social loafing occurs is because the attainment of collective versus individual goals is less dependent on personal effort; if an employee does not exert personal effort toward a collective goal, it may nevertheless be achieved via the effort of others (Karau & Williams, 1993; Kerr, 1983). Although unlikely to view personal effort as necessary to achieve a collective goal that is easy, individuals are more likely to view personal effort as necessary to achieve a collective goal that is hard. Because high levels of attention, energy, and persistence are needed to attain a difficult collective goal, individuals are unlikely to assume the goal can be attained without personal effort. Rather, perceived difficulty makes salient that goal attainment requires effort from all members of the collective, including the self, and is therefore likely to prevent social loafing. Although not the original focus of goal setting theory, scholars have investigated the effects of difficult collective goals. Consistent with findings for goals assigned to individuals, goal difficulty increases effort and performance for goals assigned to groups (Klein & Mulvey, 1995; Kleingeld, van Mierlo, & Arends, 2011; O'Leary-Kelly, Martocchio, & Frink, 1994; Weingart, 1992).

The above reasoning suggests leaders' use of contingent rhetoric increases employees'

perceptions that diversity goals are difficult to achieve, which in turn has a positive effect on their diversity effort. It follows that contingent rhetoric increases diversity effort overall (Hypothesis 2a), via both argument strength (Hypothesis 2b) and goal difficulty.

Hypothesis 2c: The positive effect of using versus not using contingent-diversity rhetoric on diversity effort is mediated by perceived goal difficulty.

Our logic furthermore implies that contingent rhetoric is more effective for increasing diversity effort than value rhetoric is. Contingent rhetoric increases effort via argument strength and goal difficulty (Hypotheses 2a-c), whereas value rhetoric does so via argument strength only (Hypotheses 3a-b). Contingent rhetoric is therefore likely to result in higher levels of diversity effort than value rhetoric does, due to its unique effect on goal difficulty.

Hypothesis 4a: Leaders' use of contingent-diversity rhetoric, relative to value-in-diversity rhetoric, has a positive effect on employees' diversity effort.

Hypothesis 4b: The positive effect of using contingent-diversity rhetoric versus value-in-diversity rhetoric on diversity effort is mediated by perceived goal difficulty.

In all, our theorizing collectively suggests leaders' diversity rhetoric is characterized by a descriptive-prescriptive paradox. Despite being descriptively less common, contingent rhetoric is prescriptively more effective than value rhetoric is.

OVERVIEW OF STUDIES

We used a multi-study, multi-method approach to test our hypotheses. We first conducted an archival study of the rhetoric used on company websites to test whether contingent rhetoric is paradoxically less common, but more effective, than value rhetoric is (Study 1). We then conducted two experiments to test whether fear of prejudice explains why contingent rhetoric is less common than value rhetoric is (Study 2) and whether argument strength and goal difficulty explain the overall and comparative effectiveness of the two rhetoric types (Study 3). Finally, we conducted a survey study to further test our hypotheses and determine whether they hold when

diversity rhetoric is communicated in different ways and by leaders at different levels (Study 4). In Studies 2-4, we tested the hypothesized mechanisms against a variety of alternatives.

There is an Open Science Framework (OSF) page for this project that includes human subjects approval, data, syntax, pre-registrations, and a supplement.[1] The supplement includes the materials, additional analyses, and power analyses for Studies 1-4. The supplement also describes additional studies we used to pilot materials, develop measures, and test our hypotheses. In addition, the supplement reports the results for additional hypotheses tested in Studies 3 and 4 that focus on an additional rhetoric type (challenge-in-diversity rhetoric), additional mechanisms (rhetoric credibility, felt responsibility for fostering diversity), and an additional outcome (diversity initiative support), as well as the results for several exploratory moderators (gender, race, and personal beliefs about diversity).

STUDY 1

Study 1 provides an initial test of Hypotheses 1a-4a using archival data. We used the rhetoric on company websites as a proxy for leader rhetoric because evidence indicates that the rhetoric used on websites matches the rhetoric used internally by leaders (Carton et al., 2014). We used a ranking of the best companies for diversity as a proxy for diversity effort because higher levels of diversity effort among employees is likely to lead to more progress toward organizational diversity goals and result in a higher diversity ranking.

Methods

Sample and procedures. We identified the corporate website for each organization on the 2019 list of *Fortune* 100 companies. We searched each website for webpages dedicated to diversity by entering keywords commonly used to describe diversity initiatives into the search bar (diversity, inclusion, affirmative action, equal opportunity, equity, and belonging) and using

[1]OSF page: https://osf.io/94n8h/?view_only=fe388e8d11534c99a19896effe7f6b78

the menu bar to conduct a manual search. We identified 280 potentially relevant webpages. We identified the subset of webpages that included diversity rhetoric (i.e., how leaders talk about diversity and its effects when justifying diversity initiatives). We deemed webpages that provide a rationale for why the organization has a diversity initiative as relevant and webpages that describe the organization's diversity initiatives, without providing an underlying rationale for those initiatives, as not relevant. We identified 102 webpages that included diversity rhetoric ($M_{\text{per organization}} = 1.02$, $SD = 0.40$). Most organizations had one relevant webpage ($N = 84$), nine had two relevant webpages, and seven did not have any relevant webpages.

Diversity rhetoric. We coded the diversity rhetoric on the webpages using two dimensions: benefits and challenges. For the benefits dimension, we coded whether each organization's webpages indicated diversity is beneficial (diversity enhances creativity, is morally virtuous, etc.). For the challenges dimension, we coded whether each organization's webpages indicated diversity is a source of challenges to be overcome, including the challenges themselves (diversity creates conflict, moral debates, etc.) and processes for overcoming the challenges (diversity requires accountability, being uncomfortable, etc.). We coded organizations as using contingent rhetoric if their webpages mentioned benefits and challenges ($N = 22$) and coded organizations as using value rhetoric if their webpages mentioned benefits only ($N = 63$). No organization's webpages mentioned challenges only, but some included neither statement type ($N = 15$) because the organization did not have any diversity webpages ($N = 7$) or their webpages described diversity policies but did not include rhetoric justifying those policies ($N = 8$). No evidence of other diversity rhetoric types emerged during the coding process.

The first three authors coded five organizations. We discussed discrepancies and refined the rubric. We repeated the process with five more organizations. The second and third authors

then independently coded the rhetoric used by each organization. Inter-rater agreement was "almost perfect" (κ = .82; Landis & Koch, 1977). We resolved discrepancies through discussion.

We coded the diversity webpages before gathering the diversity rankings. As a result, knowledge of the study hypotheses may have influenced the base rate of contingent versus value rhetoric, but not the effect of diversity rhetoric on rankings. As a robustness check, we coded the webpages with the Linguistic Inquiry and Word Count program (Pennebaker, Boyd, Jordan, & Blackburn, 2015). We created one dictionary to capture diversity's benefits and one to capture its challenges. We coded webpages with words from both dictionaries as contingent rhetoric and those with words from the benefits dictionary only as value rhetoric. Agreement between the manual and LIWC coding was high (93% overall; κ = .82-1.00) and the two coding methods produced the same statistical conclusions (online supplement, Appendix S1).

Diversity rankings. We used *Forbes* magazine's 2020 ranking of the 500 best companies for diversity as a proxy for diversity effort (Umoh, 2020). A research firm determined the rankings by surveying employees, who rated their organizations on diversity and inclusion, and gathering data on diversity outcomes, including the demographics of board members and executives. As a result, the rankings capture success in achieving diversity goals, which is a likely downstream consequence of employees' diversity effort. The data for the rankings were gathered in the fall of 2019, which was after we coded the rhetoric on company websites (summer 2019). We coded whether each of the 100 organizations in our sample was ranked as one of the 500 best companies for diversity (57 = yes, 43 = no). Treating diversity rankings as a continuous variable produced the same conclusions (online supplement, Appendix S1).

Controls. We controlled for revenues because they may affect how much companies spend on diversity initiatives and, in turn, diversity rankings. We also controlled for the number

of webpages dedicated to diversity, regardless of whether they included diversity rhetoric, and the word count of all diversity webpages to account for variation in the emphasis placed on diversity. We first ran the analyses without the controls and then added them as a robustness check, given that over-controlling can bias findings (Sturman, Sturman, & Sturman, 2021).

Results

Means, standard deviations, and correlations for all variables appear in Table 1.

[Insert Table 1 about here]

Hypothesis 1a. Hypothesis 1a states that contingent rhetoric is less common than value rhetoric. We conducted a chi-square goodness-of-fit test, which indicates whether a set of categories differ in frequency (Sirkin, 2005). The frequency of the three categories differed significantly ($\chi^2[2] = 40.34$, $p < .001$; contingent: $N = 22$, value: $N = 63$; no rhetoric: $N = 15$). A follow-up, two-way comparison revealed contingent rhetoric was significantly less common than value rhetoric ($\chi^2[1] = 19.78$, $p < .001$), which supports Hypothesis 1a.

Hypotheses 2a-4a. We used logistic regression to test the effects of leader rhetoric on diversity rankings because the rankings dependent variable is dichotomous (Cohen, Cohen, West & Aiken, 2003; Table 2). Hypotheses 2a and 3a state contingent and value rhetoric both increase diversity effort overall. We regressed diversity rankings on two dummy variables, one for contingent rhetoric and one for value rhetoric (step 1), and the controls (step 2). As a result, organizations that use neither rhetoric type was the omitted comparison. Contingent rhetoric, versus no rhetoric, increased the likelihood of being ranked as one of the best companies for diversity in step 1 ($B = 2.61$, $p < .001$) and step 2 ($B = 2.27$, $p = .010$), which supports Hypothesis 2a. Use of value rhetoric, versus no rhetoric, also increased the likelihood of being ranked as one of the best companies for diversity in step 1 ($B = 1.74$, $p = .012$), but not after the controls were added in step 2 ($B = 1.45$, $p = .055$), which partially supports Hypothesis 3a.

[Insert Table 2 about here]

Hypothesis 4a states that contingent rhetoric results in more diversity effort than value rhetoric. Consistent with Hypothesis 4a, the positive effect of contingent rhetoric, but not value rhetoric, was robust to the controls. Moreover, the zero-order correlation with diversity rankings was significant for contingent rhetoric only (r = .22, p = .028; value: r = .05, p = .621). To compare contingent and value rhetoric directly, we reran the analyses using value rhetoric as the omitted comparison. Contingent versus value rhetoric was unrelated to diversity rankings (step 1: B = 0.87, p = .126; step 2: B = 0.83, p = .152). In all, Hypothesis 4a received partial support.

Discussion

Study 1 provides initial evidence that contingent rhetoric is less common, but more effective, than value rhetoric is. We found that some leader use contingent rhetoric (22% of websites), but it is used less commonly than value rhetoric is (63% of websites). Moreover, although both contingent and value rhetoric increased the likelihood of being ranked as one of the best companies for diversity, only the effect of contingent rhetoric was robust to the controls. At the same time, the direct comparison of contingent versus value rhetoric was not significant.

The archival methodology used in Study 1 has several strengths, including high external validity and use of objective measures of diversity rhetoric and diversity effort gathered from separate sources. At the same time, the rhetoric on company websites and diversity rankings are proxies for, rather than direct measures of, leader diversity rhetoric and employee diversity effort, respectively. Moreover, Study 1 does not provide causal evidence or insight into the mechanisms that explain why contingent rhetoric is less common, but more effective, than value rhetoric is. To address these limitations, we conducted two experiments.

STUDY 2

Study 2 provides a causal test of whether fear of prejudice explains why leaders are less

likely to use contingent than value rhetoric (Hypotheses 1a-b). We presented leaders with one message that contained contingent rhetoric and one that contained value rhetoric. We asked them to evaluate the messages and select which they wanted to use to justify a diversity initiative.

In Study 2, we also tested the hypothesized mechanism—fear of prejudice—against two plausible alternatives. We theorized and found in Study 1 that value rhetoric is more common than contingent rhetoric. Leaders may be aware value rhetoric is commonly used by other leaders and use this rhetoric type themselves to comply with social norms. We therefore explored perceived message commonness as an alternative mechanism. Second, rather than being motivated by self-presentation concerns (i.e., fear of prejudice), the rhetoric leaders use may be motivated by their beliefs regarding effectiveness; leaders may use value rhetoric more than contingent rhetoric because they believe it is more likely to increase employees' diversity effort. We therefore explored perceived message effectiveness as a second alternative mechanism.

Methods

Participants and procedures. We used Prolific Academic to recruit 136 working adults in the United States with experience as a leader (i.e., experience supervising others), who received $1.50. The participants were 65% male, 35% female, 83% White, 7% Asian, 6% Black, and 4% Hispanic/Latino. They were 38.15 years old (*SD* = 9.84), had 17.53 years of work experience (*SD* = 9.64), had an organizational tenure of 8.19 years (*SD* = 7.90), supervised 6.24 other employees (*SD* = 6.97), and had 6.74 years of experience as a supervisor (*SD* = 5.60).

We asked the participants to read two messages that could be used to justify a diversity initiative, select one of the messages, and do an audio recording of that message. We told participants that a separate sample of employees would rate the recordings. We guaranteed participants $1.00 and told them they could earn up to an additional $0.50, depending on how favorably others rated their message. We did not specify the dimension on which the employees

would rate the recorded message to avoid influencing participants' motives in selecting a message. Participants read the two messages, answered questions about each, and selected which they would like to record. We then informed participants they would not record the message, indicated they would receive the full bonus, and debriefed them on the need for deception.

Diversity rhetoric. We manipulated diversity rhetoric within subjects because doing so enabled us to include a behavioral measure of message choice (described below). We presented participants with one message that contained contingent rhetoric and one that contained value rhetoric (online supplement, Appendix S2). Each message had the same number of words. To increase realism, we used language from the diversity webpages gathered in Study 1 in the messages. The contingent rhetoric message stated that diversity has many benefits, but only if its challenges are overcome, and that the company is implementing a diversity initiative to leverage diversity's opportunities by overcoming its challenges. The value rhetoric message stated that diversity has many benefits and that the company is implementing a diversity initiative due to the opportunities diversity presents. We counterbalanced the order of presentation of the messages.

Mechanisms. We used three items to measure fear of appearing prejudiced (α = .96; e.g., "If I used this message, employees who heard the message would think I am prejudiced against minority group members;" adapted from James, Lovato, & Cropanzano, 1994). We measured the first alternative mechanism—perceived message commonness—with three items we created due to lack of an existing measure (α = .96; e.g., "This message is a common message about diversity") and the second alternative mechanism—perceived effectiveness for increasing diversity effort—with four items we adapted from a work effort scale by inserting references to diversity and inclusion (α = .94; e.g., "If I used this message, it would encourage employees to always try hard to foster diversity and inclusion;" De Cooman, De Gieter, Pepermans, Jegers, &

Van Acker, 2009). All mechanism measures used the same scale (1 = strongly disagree, 7 = strongly agree). Participants completed the mechanism measures twice, once for each message.

Message use. We asked participant to select one of the two messages to record, which provides a behavioral measure of message use. Participants completed the message choice measure once, but completed the mechanism measures twice (i.e., once for each message). As a result, we could not test the indirect effect of message type on message choice, via the mechanisms; because the mechanisms vary both within and between participants, they cannot be used to predict message choice, which varies between participants only. We therefore measured likelihood of using each message with three items we created (α = .97; e.g., "I want to use this message to justify the diversity initiative;" 1 = strongly disagree, 7 = strongly agree) and used this measure to test indirect effects. We manipulated the order of the mechanism and message use measures. Because we created two of the study measures (message commonness, likelihood of message use), we explored the factor structure the measures in a pilot study and found they loaded on separate factors (online supplement, Appendix S2).

Controls. We did not include control variables in the main analyses because Study 2 is an experiment. We reran the analyses controlling for gender and race, given that demographics can affect reactions to diversity rhetoric (e.g., Starck et al., 2021), as well as the order of the messages and measures, which did not alter our findings (online supplement, Appendix S2).

Checks. We checked the validity of the rhetoric manipulation in a separate pilot study to prevent demand effects (Lonati, Quiroga, Zehnder, & Antonakis, 2018). We manipulated rhetoric type between subjects, instead of within subjects, to prevent participants' perceptions of the two messages from affecting one another and found that the manipulation worked as expected (online supplement, Appendix S2). In the main study, we included an attention check

by asking participants to select the incorrect answer to a math problem. Including participants who failed the check did not change support for our hypotheses; however, one alternative mechanism (perceived effectiveness) is only significant if those who failed the check are included (online supplement, Appendix S2). We took a conservative approach by excluding those who failed the check in the main analyses ($N = 15$, 10% of initial 151 participants).

Results

We used multilevel confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) to assess the factor structure of the study measures because responses varied both within and between participants. A four-factor model (fear of prejudice, message commonness, message effectiveness, likelihood of message use) fit the data well (CFI = .97, RMSEA = .06, SRMR = .04, $\chi^2[59] = 115.73$, $p < .001$) and significantly better than alternative models (online supplement, Appendix S2). Descriptive statistics, correlations, and paired-sample *t*-tests for the study variables appear in Table 3.

[Insert Table 3 about here]

Hypotheses 1a-b. Hypotheses 1a-b state that leaders are less likely to use contingent than value rhetoric, due to fear of prejudice. We first analyzed the rhetoric choice measure. In support of Hypothesis 1a, a chi-square goodness-of-fit test revealed participants chose the contingent message ($N = 51$, 37.5%) less often than the value message ($N = 85$, 62.5%; $\chi^2 = 8.50$, $p = .004$).

We used likelihood of message use to test the hypothesized mediating effect of fear of appearing prejudiced (Hypothesis 1b, Table 4). We used multilevel regression because message type was nested within participants (Klein & Kozlowski, 2000) and because regression allowed us to test the effects of both categorical (rhetoric type) and continuous (the mechanisms) variables. To test indirect effects, we multiplied the relevant coefficients and tested their significance with 20,000 bias-corrected, bootstrapped confidence intervals (Edwards & Lambert, 2007). We tested a single mediation model, in which we entered the hypothesized and alternative

mechanisms simultaneously as parallel mediators (Figure 1).

[Insert Table 4 & Figure 1 about here]

The contingent versus value message resulted in higher fear of appearing prejudiced (b = 0.61, $p < .001$). Fear of prejudice, in turn, reduced the likelihood of message use (b = -0.16, p = .017). Thus, in support of Hypothesis 1b, contingent versus value rhetoric had a negative indirect effect on likelihood of use, via fear of appearing prejudiced (b = -0.10, 95% CI = -0.18 to -0.01).

Alternative mechanisms. Participants perceived the contingent message as less common than the value message (b = -1.58, $p < .001$) and perceived commonness was positively related to likelihood of message use (b = 0.29, $p < .001$). As a result, the contingent versus value message had a negative indirect effect on likelihood of use, via perceived commonness (b = -0.46, 95% CI = -0.69 to -0.24). Alternatively, the contingent versus value message was unrelated to perceived effectiveness for increasing employees' diversity effort (b = -0.22, p = .070). Thus, even though perceived effectiveness increased likelihood of message use (b = 0.57, $p < .001$), the associated indirect effect was not significant (b = -0.13, 95% CI = -0.26 to 0.01).

Discussion

Study 2 provides causal evidence that leaders use contingent rhetoric less commonly than value rhetoric and insight into the mechanisms that explain this effect. We found leaders are less likely to use contingent than value rhetoric because contingent rhetoric evokes higher fear of appearing prejudiced. Exploratory analyses revealed leaders are also less likely to use contingent than value rhetoric because they are aware contingent rhetoric is used less commonly by other leaders; however, the hypothesized effect of fear of prejudice remained significant when entered simultaneously with perceived commonness. We explored whether, but did not find that, leaders perceive contingent or value rhetoric as more effective for increasing employees' diversity effort.

Study 2 provides causal evidence and insight into the underlying mechanisms that explain

which rhetoric type leaders use more commonly, but does not provide insight into which rhetoric type is more effective for increasing employees' diversity effort. We therefore conducted a second experiment to test which rhetoric type is more effective and why.

STUDY 3

Study 3 provides a causal test of the mechanisms that explain the effects of contingent and value rhetoric on employees' diversity effort (Hypotheses 2b-c, 3b, & 4b). We manipulated the rhetoric used by organizational leaders and then asked a sample of employees to evaluate argument strength and goal difficulty and to complete a behavioral measure of diversity effort.

In Study 3, we also tested the hypothesized mechanisms against an alternative possibility. We found in Study 2 that leaders are more likely to use contingent than value rhetoric, due to fear of appearing prejudiced. We tested whether this fear is grounded in reality by exploring whether leaders' use of contingent rhetoric causes employees to perceive them as prejudiced, as well as whether perceived leader prejudice affects employees' diversity effort.

Methods

Participants and procedures. We recruited 503 working adults in the United States via Prolific Academic, who received $2.50. Participants were 55% male, 44% female, 1% other genders, 72% White, 14% Asian, 8% Hispanic/Latino, 3% Black, and 2% other races/ethnicities. They were 32.97 years old (*SD* = 9.06), had 10.30 years of work experience (*SD* = 8.99), and had an organizational tenure of 5.29 years (*SD* = 4.96).

Participants assumed the role of a new employee of a consumer products organization, named Dosagen, that was rolling out a diversity initiative. Participants read information about the company, followed by an email message from the company's senior leaders about the initiative, which included the diversity rhetoric manipulation. Participants answered questions about the message and were asked to generate ideas to make the initiative successful.

To increase realism and psychological fidelity, we told participants the information was based on a real organization, asked them to imagine they held a position at the company that is similar to a position they currently hold or have held in the past, and asked them to draw on their work experiences when generating ideas for the diversity initiative. In addition, we informed them that we would use their ideas to help make diversity initiatives more effective.

Diversity rhetoric. We assigned participants to one of four conditions embedded in the email message about the new diversity initiative (online supplement, Appendix S3). The contingent and value rhetoric conditions were the same as in Study 2. The control condition indicated that the company is implementing a diversity initiative, but did not include any rhetoric. We also included a challenge rhetoric condition (i.e., diversity is problematic), which we treated as a control variable (see the online supplement, Appendix S8 for further discussion).

Mechanisms. We measured argument strength with four items (α = .97; e.g., "The arguments Dosagen's leaders provide for implementing the new diversity initiative are: 1 = very weak, 7 = very strong;" adapted from Munch & Swassy, 1988) and measured diversity goal difficulty with seven items (α = .88; e.g., "Creating diversity and inclusion in this organization will be difficult;" 1 = strongly disagree, 7 = strongly agree; adapted from Lee & Bobko, 1992). We measured the alternative mechanism—perceived leader prejudice—with three items (α = .96; e.g., "The leaders who wrote the message about the new diversity initiative are prejudiced against minority group members;" adapted from James et al., 1994). We also explored several alternative mechanisms, none of which was supported (online supplement, Appendix S3).

Diversity effort. We told participants that the company's leaders wanted their input on making the diversity initiative effective and asked them to generate up to 10 ideas. We used the number of relevant ideas each participant generated as a behavioral measure of diversity effort.

Using the total number of words and characters the participants wrote produced similar conclusions (online supplement, Appendix S3). We also included two diversity effort intentions measures (i.e., how much effort participants would put into fostering diversity and if they would volunteer for a diversity task force), which we discuss in the online supplement (Appendix S3). We manipulated the order of presentation of the mechanism and diversity effort measures.

Controls. We did not include control variables in the main analyses, due to our use of an experimental design. We reran the analyses controlling for participants' gender and race, given that demographics can affect reactions to diversity rhetoric (e.g., Starck et al., 2021), as well as measure order. Doing so does not change our conclusions (online supplement, Appendix S3).

Checks. As a manipulation check, participants recalled how the leaders talked about diversity (adds value if the challenges are overcome; adds value and is beneficial; is challenging and creates problems). As attention checks, we asked participants to recall the company name and select the incorrect answer to a math problem. Removing those who failed the first (0.4%) or second (8%) check did not alter our conclusions (online supplement, Appendix S3).

Results

We created dummy variables indicating if participants selected each manipulation check option (1=yes, 0 = no) and used logistic regression to test the effect of condition on the manipulation check. Participants in the contingent condition (1 = yes, 0 = no) selected the contingent response more than those in other conditions (value: B = -2.39; challenge: B = -1.56; control: B = -2.14; all ps < .001), participants in the value condition selected the value response more than those in other conditions (contingent: B = -2.48; challenge: B = -3.63; control: B = -1.41; all ps < .001), and participants in the challenge condition selected the challenge response more than those in other conditions (contingent: B = -3.18; value: B = -3.81; control: B = -4.50; all ps < .001). We also verified that a three-factor CFA model (goal difficulty, argument strength,

leader prejudice) fit the data well (CFI = .93, RMSEA = .11, SRMR = .09, $\chi^2[74] = 534.61$, $p < .001$) and significantly better than alternative models (online supplement, Appendix S3).[2]

The descriptive statistics and correlations for the study variables appear in Table 5. We created dummy variables for each of the rhetoric conditions and tested our hypotheses with regression because this approach allowed us to test the effects of both categorical (rhetoric type) and continuous (the mechanisms) variables (Table 6). We tested the significance of indirect effects with 20,000 bias-corrected, bootstrapped confidence intervals. We tested two mediation models, one comparing contingent and value rhetoric to no rhetoric (Hypotheses 2b-3c) and one comparing the two rhetoric types to each other (Hypothesis 4b). In both models, we entered the hypothesized and alternative mechanisms simultaneously as parallel mediators (Figures 2a-b).

[Insert Tables 5-6 and Figures 2a-b about here]

Hypotheses 2b-4b. Hypotheses 2b and 2c state contingent rhetoric increases diversity effort overall, via (b) perceived argument strength and (c) perceived goal difficulty. To test these hypotheses, we used the no rhetoric control condition as the omitted comparison. Contingent versus no rhetoric had a positive effect on argument strength ($b = 0.43$, $p = .024$) and goal difficulty ($b = 0.36$, $p < .001$), but only goal difficulty ($b = 0.30$, $p = .012$) was positively related to diversity effort (strength: $b = -0.08$, $p = .311$). As a result, contingent versus no rhetoric had a positive indirect effect on diversity effort, via goal difficulty ($b = 0.11$, 95% CI = 0.03 to 0.25), but not via argument strength ($b = -0.03$, 95% CI = -0.12 to 0.03). Thus, Hypothesis 2c was supported and Hypothesis 2b was not. Given that overly-difficult goals can decrease effort (e.g., Fu et al., 2009), we tested the curvilinear effect of goal difficulty on diversity effort, which was not significant ($b = 0.10$, $p = .232$).

[2] Omitting two highly-correlated goal difficulty items improved model fit (CFI = .99, RMSEA = .05, SRMR = .03, $\chi^2[51] = 114.47$, $p < .001$). Removing these items does not change our findings (online supplement, Appendix S3).

Hypothesis 3b states that value rhetoric increases diversity effort overall, via perceived argument strength. Value versus no rhetoric increased argument strength (b = 0.60, p = .002). As noted above, argument strength was unrelated to diversity effort. Thus, the associated indirect effect was not significant (b = -0.04, 95% CI = -0.15 to 0.05) and Hypothesis 3b was not supported. Value rhetoric was also unrelated to goal difficulty (b = -0.17, p = .121).

Hypothesis 4b states contingent versus value rhetoric increases diversity effort, via perceived goal difficulty. To test this hypothesis, we used value rhetoric as the omitted comparison. Contingent versus value rhetoric increased goal difficulty (b = 0.53, p < .001). As noted above, goal difficulty was positively related to diversity effort. As a result, the indirect effect of contingent versus value rhetoric on diversity effort, via goal difficulty, was positive and significant (b = 0.16, 95% CI = 0.04 to 0.34), which supports Hypothesis 4b. Contingent versus value rhetoric did not affect argument strength (b = -0.17, p = .372).

Alternative mechanism. Contingent rhetoric did not affect perceived leader prejudice, relative to both no rhetoric (b = -0.12 p = .562) and value rhetoric (b = 0.32, p = .115). Value versus no rhetoric reduced leader prejudice (b = -0.44, p = .030), but leader prejudice was unrelated to diversity effort (b = -0.03 p = .688). As a result, neither rhetoric type had an indirect effect on diversity effort via perceived leader prejudice, relative to no rhetoric or to each other.

Discussion

Study 3 provides causal evidence that contingent rhetoric is more effective than value rhetoric is and identifies a mechanism that explains this effect. Contingent rhetoric increased the perceived difficulty of diversity goals, both overall and relative to value rhetoric, which was in turn positively related to diversity effort. In addition, contingent and value rhetoric both increased the perceived strength of arguments in favor of diversity, but argument strength was unrelated to diversity effort. As a result, contingent rhetoric had a stronger positive effect on

diversity effort than value rhetoric did, due to its unique effect on goal difficulty. We also explored whether contingent rhetoric causes employees to perceive leaders as prejudiced, but contingent rhetoric did not affect leader prejudice, relative to value rhetoric or no rhetoric.

Studies 2 and 3 have several strengths, including their causal designs, test of mechanisms, and behavioral outcome measures. At the same time, both studies are experiments, which raises the possibility of demand effects. We designed Studies 2 and 3 using best practices for avoiding demand effects (online supplement, Appendices S2-3), but cannot rule out this possibility entirely. Studies 2 and 3 also rely on simulated contexts. We addressed this concern by designing our experiments to be high in realism (e.g., using rhetoric from company websites) and including behavioral outcome measures. Moreover, our experimental findings align with our field-based findings in Study 1. We further address these limitations by returning to the field in Study 4.

STUDY 4

Study 4 provides an additional test of which rhetoric type is more common (Hypothesis 1a) and the mechanism through which contingent and value rhetoric affect diversity effort (Hypotheses 2b-4c). We asked employees to report on the diversity rhetoric their leaders use, perceived argument strength, perceived goal difficulty, and their level of diversity effort.

Study 4 has two additional goals. First, we tested several alternative mechanisms. Prior work indicates that, although value rhetoric often motivates employees to foster diversity, it can have the opposite effect. Evidence documents that emphasizing diversity's value can increase beliefs that minority groups are treated fairly, which implies diversity effort is not needed (e.g., Kaiser et al., 2013). Emphasizing diversity's value can also increase negative evaluations of minority groups and perceptions majority groups are treated unfairly, both of which may reduce diversity effort (e.g., Dover et al., 2021; Plaut et al., 2011). Because both contingent and value rhetoric emphasize diversity's value, we explored whether they reduce diversity effort via these

mechanisms. We found significant effects for perceived fairness for minority groups only and therefore report results for the other two mechanisms in the online supplement (Appendix S4).

Second, we explored whether diversity rhetoric has similar effects when communicated in different ways and by leaders at different levels. We define diversity rhetoric to include rhetoric that is either written or spoken and that comes from leaders at any level; however, our studies thus far focus on the effects of rhetoric communicated via written statements from senior leaders. In Study 4 we test if our findings hold when leader rhetoric is not confined to written statements by asking employees to report on the rhetoric they hear, regardless of how it is communicated. We also ask employees to report the level of the leader they hear talk about diversity the most and explore if the effects of leader rhetoric depend on leader level.

Methods

Participants and procedures. We conducted two surveys to minimize common method variance (Podsakoff, MacKenzie, Lee, & Podsakoff, 2003). We recruited 1,002 working adults in the United States via Prolific Academic, who completed the first survey for $1.00. We asked them to complete a second survey a week later for $1.50. The sample included 893 participants who completed both surveys (89% response rate). The first survey measured diversity rhetoric and the mechanisms. The second measured diversity effort and the controls. Participants were 54% male, 45% female, 1% other genders, 78% White, 8% Asian, 7% Black, 5% Hispanic/ Latino, and 2% other races/ethnicities. They were 37.07 years old (*SD* = 10.70), had 16.70 years of work experience (*SD* = 10.50), and had an organizational tenure of 6.65 years (*SD* = 6.50).

Leader diversity rhetoric (time 1). We developed and validated a diversity rhetoric measure in three studies (online supplement, Appendix S6). All items begin with the stem: "When talking about diversity, leaders in my organization emphasize that…" We instructed participants to report on the rhetoric they hear from leaders at any level (senior leaders, direct

supervisors, other leaders) because employees are likely to hear diversity rhetoric from multiple leaders at different levels and this approach captures the full range of diversity rhetoric they are exposed to. We used four items each to measure contingent rhetoric (α = .92; e.g., "Diversity is beneficial for organizations, but only if everyone learns to appreciate differences") and value rhetoric (α = .98; e.g., "Diversity in organizations is beneficial;" 1 = strongly disagree, 7 = strongly agree for both scales). We also measured challenge rhetoric (four items; α = .96; e.g., "Diversity in organizations creates problems"), which we treated as a control variable.

Mechanisms (time 1). We used the same measures as in Study 3 for argument strength (α = .97) and goal difficulty (α = .94). We measured the alternative mechanism—fairness for minority groups—with three items (α = .90; e.g., "In my organization, members of historically disadvantaged groups are treated fairly;" adapted from Mor Barak, Cherin, & Berkman, 1998).

Diversity effort (time 2). We measured diversity effort with 10 items, which we adapted from a work effort measure by inserting references to diversity and inclusion (α = .98; e.g., "I always try hard to foster diversity and inclusion;" De Cooman et al., 2009). For robustness, we included a measure of diversity effort that focused on specific behaviors, instead of effort in general (α = .88; e.g., "I monitor my behavior to prevent discriminating against others at work"), which produced the same conclusions (online supplement, Appendix S4).

Leader characteristics (time 2). We asked participants how many leaders they hear talk about diversity to determine whether employees hear diversity rhetoric from a single or multiple leaders. We also asked them to report the level of the leader who talks about diversity the most to determine whether the effects of diversity rhetoric depend on leader level.

Controls (time 2). We controlled for diversity rhetoric amount ("How often do leaders in your organization talk about diversity?;" 1 = never, 5 = always) to test if the content of leaders'

rhetoric matters, over-and-above the amount. We also controlled for gender and race because demographic groups can vary in their reactions to diversity rhetoric (e.g., Starck et al., 2021).

Attention check (time 2). We asked participants to select the incorrect answer to a math problem. Removing those who failed (N = 12; 1%) did not alter our findings (online supplement, Appendix S4).

Results

Descriptive statistics and correlations appear in Table 7. A seven-factor CFA model (three leader rhetoric types, argument strength, goal difficulty, perceived minority fairness, diversity effort) fit the data well (CFI = .96, RMSEA = .06, SRMR = .05, $\chi^2[573] = 2{,}275.13$, $p < .001$) and significantly better than alternative models (online supplement, Appendix S4).[3]

[Insert Table 7 about here]

Hypothesis 1a. We used a paired-samples t-test to compare the mean for contingent and value rhetoric. In support of Hypotheses 1a, employees reported their leaders use contingent rhetoric (M = 4.67, SD = 1.54) less than value rhetoric (M = 5.37, SD = 1.51; t = 17.57, $p < .001$).

Hypothesis 2b-4b. We tested Hypotheses 2b-4b with regression because all study variables are continuous and used 20,000 bias-corrected, bootstrapped confidence intervals to test indirect effects. We tested a single mediation model, in which we entered the hypothesized and alternative mechanisms simultaneously as parallel mediators (Figure 3). We ran the models without the controls as an initial test and then added them as a robustness check (Table 8). We discuss the models with the controls only because adding them does not change our conclusions.

[Insert Table 8 & Figure 3 about here]

Hypotheses 2b-c state that contingent rhetoric has two indirect effects on diversity effort, one via argument strength and one via goal difficulty. Contingent rhetoric was positively related

[3]The N for the CFA is 891, not 893, because two participants did not complete a single item.

to argument strength ($b = 0.12$, $p < .001$) and goal difficulty ($b = 0.25$, $p < .001$), both of which were positively related to diversity effort (strength: $b = 0.34$, $p < .001$; difficulty: $b = 0.09$, $p = .006$). As a result, contingent rhetoric had positive indirect effects on diversity effort, via both argument strength ($b = 0.04$, 95% CI = 0.02 to 0.07) and goal difficulty ($b = 0.02$, 95% CI = 0.01 to 0.04). In addition to the indirect effects, contingent rhetoric had a positive direct effect on diversity effort that remained significant after including the mechanisms in the regression model ($b = 0.16$, $p < .001$). We again tested the curvilinear effect of goal difficulty, which was significant ($b = 0.04$, $p = .029$); however, overly-difficult goals did not reduce diversity effort. Rather, the positive slope for the effect of goal difficulty on diversity effort becomes steeper as goal difficulty increases (online supplement, Appendix S4).

Hypothesis 3b states that value rhetoric has an indirect effect on diversity effort, via argument strength. Value rhetoric was positively related to argument strength ($b = 0.19$, $p < .001$), which was positively related to diversity effort. Thus, in support of Hypothesis 3b, value rhetoric had a positive indirect effect on diversity effort, via argument strength ($b = 0.06$, 95% CI = 0.04 to 0.10). Value rhetoric was unrelated to goal difficulty ($b = -0.06$, $p = .209$), resulting in a non-significant indirect effect ($b = -0.01$, 95% CI = -0.02 to 0.00).

Hypothesis 4b states contingent versus value rhetoric has a stronger indirect effect on diversity effort, via goal difficulty. We calculated the difference between the indirect effect of each rhetoric types on effort, via goal difficulty. In support of Hypothesis 4b, the indirect effect was larger for contingent than for value rhetoric ($b_{diff} = 0.03$, 95% CI = 0.01 to 0.06).

Alternative mechanism. Value rhetoric was positively related to perceived fairness for minority groups ($b = 0.19$, $p < .001$), but contingent rhetoric was not ($b = -0.02$, $p = .631$). Perceived fairness, in turn, was negatively related to diversity effort ($b = -0.12$, $p < .001$). As a

result, value rhetoric, but not contingent rhetoric, had a negative indirect effect on diversity effort, via perceived fairness for minorities (b = -0.02, 95% CI = -0.05 to -0.01).

Leader characteristics. Employees reported hearing diversity rhetoric from multiple leaders (M = 3.24, SD = 4.51) and that leaders at different levels talk about diversity the most (direct supervisor: 43%; senior executive: 31%; other: 25%). Our findings held controlling for the number of leaders employees hear talk about diversity and the level of the leader who talks about diversity the most. Neither leader characteristic moderated the effect of contingent or value rhetoric on the mechanisms or diversity effort (online supplement, Appendix S4).

Total effects. We calculated the sum of all direct and indirect effects for both rhetoric types and tested their difference. Contingent rhetoric (b = 0.22, 95% CI = 0.13 to 0.31) and value rhetoric (b = 0.04, 95% CI = 0.01 to 0.08) both had a positive total effect on diversity effort, but the total effect was significantly larger for contingent rhetoric than for value rhetoric (b_{diff} = 0.18, 95% CI = 0.08 to 0.28).

Discussion

Study 4 provides further evidence that contingent rhetoric is less common, but more effective, than value rhetoric is. Employees reported their leaders use value rhetoric more than contingent rhetoric. Both rhetoric types increased diversity effort via argument strength; however, only contingent rhetoric increased diversity effort via goal difficulty and only value rhetoric decreased diversity effort via fairness for minorities. As a result, contingent rhetoric had a stronger positive effect on diversity effort than value rhetoric did. We also found that diversity rhetoric had the same effects when not constrained to rhetoric communicated via written statements and when communicated by leaders at different levels.

A strength of Study 4 is our use of time separation between measures, which reduces common method variance concerns. Although diversity rhetoric and diversity effort were

measured at different times, diversity rhetoric and the mechanisms were measured at the same time. We therefore conducted additional analyses, which provide further evidence that common method variance cannot fully account for our findings (online supplement, Appendix S4). Another limitation of Study 4 is its correlational design; however, the findings largely converge with our experiments. Finally, Study 4, like Studies 2 and 3, used an online panel sample. Nevertheless, we reached similar conclusions in an archival study (Study 1) and an additional study of employees of a large agrobusiness organization (online supplement, Appendix S7).

GENERAL DISCUSSION

The present work offers new insight into the content, causes, and consequences of leaders' diversity rhetoric. We introduce the construct of contingent rhetoric and build theory regarding how common and effective it is relative to value rhetoric, which is the focus of prior work. We theorize and find leaders are less likely to use contingent rhetoric than value rhetoric, due to fear of appearing prejudiced, but contingent rhetoric results in more diversity effort than value rhetoric does because it increases perceptions that diversity goals are difficult to achieve. As a result, leaders' diversity rhetoric is characterized by a descriptive-prescriptive paradox: the rhetoric type that is descriptively most common is not prescriptively most effective.

Implications for Theory

Our research offers a number of theoretical contributions to the literature on diversity in organizations. By introducing a new rhetoric type, we expand theory on the content of leaders' diversity rhetoric. Contingent rhetoric, which emphasizes diversity is beneficial if the challenges are overcome, is grounded in the reality of diversity's effects, but has yet to receive scholarly attention. Although less common than value rhetoric is, we find contingent rhetoric is indeed used by some leaders. Contingent rhetoric was used on 22% of organizational websites in Study 1 and 53% of employees at least slightly agreed that their leaders use contingent rhetoric in

Study 4. We therefore advance theory by demonstrating that prior scholarship on diversity rhetoric is underspecified, in that it accounts for only subset of the rhetoric types leaders use.

In addition to identifying contingent rhetoric as a new rhetoric type, we build theory regarding how common and effective it is and, in doing so, challenge an implicit assumption of prior work. Scholars have demonstrated that value rhetoric is commonly used by leaders and often effective for increasing employees' diversity effort; value rhetoric tends to increase attitudes and behaviors that foster diversity, relative to no rhetoric and colorblind rhetoric that emphasizes diversity is inconsequential (e.g., Richard et al., 2000; Wilton et al., 2015). Thus, existing theory implicitly suggests value rhetoric is the most effective rhetoric type. We theorize and find that, despite being less common, contingent rhetoric is more effective than value rhetoric is. As a result, we advance theory in the diversity rhetoric literature by challenging the implicit assumption that value rhetoric is the most effective rhetoric type.

Beyond demonstrating a descriptive-prescriptive paradox, we identify the psychological mechanisms that explain it and, in doing so, contribute to theory in several additional ways. Prior work demonstrates that leaders commonly use value rhetoric, and specifically the business case, to justify diversity initiatives (e.g., Edelman et al., 2001; Georgeac & Rattan, 2023). Yet why leaders use certain rhetoric types has yet to receive scholarly attention. We use the psychology of the self to identify self-presentation concerns, and fear of appearing prejudiced in particular, as a salient motive among leaders that explains why they are more hesitant to use contingent than value rhetoric. We thereby advance theory by identifying the desire to present the self favorably as an underlying mechanism that drives the rhetoric type leaders use.

Our theoretical grounding in the psychology of the self also provides insight into why the most common and most effective rhetoric types are not one and the same. We predict that

leaders' focus on the self prevents them from accurately understanding how their rhetoric affects employees. Consistent with this idea, and despite leaders' fears, contingent rhetoric does not cause employees to perceive leaders as prejudiced. Rather, leaders' use of contingent rhetoric has no effect on employee perceptions of leader prejudice, relative to both no rhetoric and value rhetoric (Study 3). Moreover, leaders are unaware that contingent rhetoric is more effective than value rhetoric is. Relative to value rhetoric, leaders do not perceive contingent rhetoric as differentially likely to increase employees' diversity effort at the traditional significance level ($p < .05$) and perceive contingent rhetoric as less likely to increase diversity effort when the significance level is relaxed ($p < .10$; Study 2). As a result, our work implies that the most effective rhetoric type is not the most common because leaders hold inaccurate perceptions regarding how employees react to the diversity rhetoric they use.

We also identify the mechanisms that explain the effectiveness of contingent and value rhetoric and, in doing so, advance theory on the factors that motivate employees to foster diversity and inclusion. Prior work focuses on why employees undermine diversity and identifies perceptions of minority and majority groups as underlying mechanisms. Specifically, rhetoric and policies that emphasize diversity is valuable can increase perceived fairness for and negative evaluations of minority groups, as well as perceived unfairness for majority groups, and each of these perceptions can motivate employees to undermine diversity (Kaiser et al., 2013; Leslie, 2019; Nishii et al., 2018). We instead focus on why employees foster diversity and identify perceptions of diversity goals themselves as underlying mechanisms. We theorize and find that perceptions that there are strong arguments in favor of diversity goals explain why both contingent and value rhetoric increase diversity effort overall and that perceptions that diversity goals are difficult to achieve explain why contingent rhetoric results in more diversity effort than

value rhetoric does. Moreover, both argument strength and goal difficulty increase diversity effort, after accounting for the perceptions of minority and majority groups focused on in prior work (Study 4). We thereby advance theory by demonstrating that whether employees undermine versus foster diversity is not solely driven by perceptions of minority and majority groups, but is also driven by perceptions of diversity goals themselves.

Our theory suggests contingent rhetoric is more effective than value rhetoric is, due to its unique emphasis on diversity's challenges and the associated increase in perceived goal difficulty. At the same time, our theory does not suggest rhetoric that emphasizes diversity's challenges only (i.e., challenge rhetoric) is effective. We hypothesize that contingent rhetoric increases diversity effort via both a positive effect on goal difficulty that is unique and a positive effect on argument strength that is shared with value rhetoric. Unlike contingent rhetoric, challenge rhetoric is likely to decrease, instead of increase, argument strength. We investigated challenge rhetoric in several studies and found some evidence that, like contingent rhetoric, challenge rhetoric increases diversity effort via perceived goal difficulty; this effect emerged in Study 3, but not in Study 4. We also found challenge rhetoric decreases perceived argument strength and has additional negative effects, including perceptions that leaders who use challenge rhetoric are prejudiced, low expectancy of attaining diversity goals, and a direct negative effect on diversity effort (online supplement, Appendix S8). As a result, our work suggests contingent rhetoric is effective for increasing diversity effort not solely because it acknowledges diversity's challenges, but because it does so while simultaneously emphasizing diversity's benefits.

In addition to testing the hypothesized mechanisms, we explored a number of alternatives that may contribute to the effectiveness of contingent and value rhetoric (Studies 3-4). Only one significant effect emerged: value rhetoric, but not contingent rhetoric, increased perceptions that

minority groups are treated fairly, which in turn reduced diversity effort (Study 4; see Kaiser et al., 2013 for similar findings). Because contingent rhetoric emphasizes benefitting from diversity requires overcoming challenges, it may prevent assumptions that minority groups are necessarily treated fairly and the associated decline in diversity effort. As a result, contingent rhetoric is more effective than value rhetoric is both because it affects perceptions of diversity goals (i.e., increases goal difficulty, in addition to argument strength) and because it does not affect perceptions of minority groups (i.e., does not increase perceived fairness for minorities).

Although our primary theoretical contributions are to the diversity literature, we offer secondary contributions to the literatures on self-presentation and goal setting. Our prediction that contingent rhetoric is less common than value rhetoric is grounded in evidence that speakers avoid negative content about diversity, due to self-presentation concerns (Bell & Hartmann, 2007; Bergsieker et al., 2012). Yet prior work has focused on content that is overtly negative, such as stereotypes of outgroups as incompetent. In contrast, contingent rhetoric includes content that is subtly negative; contingent rhetoric implies benefitting from diversity requires overcoming challenges, but does not imply diversity is detrimental. We theorize and find contingent rhetoric nevertheless evokes fear of appearing prejudiced, likely due to the high level of scrutiny leaders face regarding diversity (e.g., Chang et al., 2019). As a result, the happy talk phenomenon is more prevalent than prior theory would suggest, in that self-presentation concerns motivate leaders to omit diversity-related content even if it is only subtly negative.

Our work also has implications for goal setting theory. Although the historical focus of the goal setting literature is goals assigned to individuals, goal difficulty also increases effort and performance on goals assigned to groups (e.g., Lock & Latham 2002; Kleingeld et al., 2011). Building on this body of work, we theorize that perceived difficulty increases effort toward

organizational diversity goals by enhancing perceptions that their attainment requires effort from all organizational members, including the self. Our logic therefore implies that perceived diversity goal difficulty has a positive effect on diversity effort because it increases the extent to which employees believe they need to take personal responsibility for achieving diversity goals, instead of relying on others. We tested this idea and found that felt responsibility for fostering diversity is a second-stage mechanism that further explains the effects of contingent rhetoric; contingent rhetoric increases diversity effort serially via goal difficulty and, in turn, felt responsibility for fostering diversity (online supplement, Appendix S4). We therefore contribute to research on goal setting by providing further insight into the mechanisms that explain why perceived goal difficulty increases effort in the context of collective organizational goals.

Implications for Practice

The descriptive-prescriptive paradox we uncover has practical implications for fostering diversity and inclusion in organizations. Leaders commonly use value rhetoric to justify diversity initiatives, yet diversity and inclusion remain elusive goals in many organizations. Thus, despite evidence that value rhetoric often motivates employees to foster diversity (e.g., Richard et al., 2000), its continued use is likely insufficient for attaining diversity goals. Rather, additional strategies are needed for motivating higher levels of diversity effort among employees.

We identify contingent rhetoric as one such tool leaders can use to motivate employees to foster diversity and inclusion that is less common, but nevertheless more effective, than value rhetoric is. Leaders' hesitancy to use contingent rhetoric is understandable, given that it is driven by fear of appearing prejudiced. At the same time, leaders' fears are unfounded and counterproductive. Contingent rhetoric does not increase perceived leader prejudice, even though fear of appearing prejudiced prevents leaders from using this rhetoric type. Our research therefore suggests leaders can increase employees' diversity effort, and in doing so help their

organizations become more diverse and inclusive, by changing the way they talk about diversity. Rather than emphasizing diversity is necessarily beneficial, leaders should use more realistic diversity rhetoric by emphasizing that realizing the benefits of diversity requires overcoming its challenges. Doing so is likely to result in higher levels of diversity effort among employees and also unlikely to result in perceptions of leaders as prejudiced.

At first blush, encouraging leaders to change their diversity rhetoric appears to be a straightforward, easy-to-implement intervention. Yet our theory regarding why leaders are hesitant to use contingent rhetoric suggests carefully-designed interventions may be needed. We theorize leaders are hesitant to convey even subtly negative diversity-related content, due to the high levels of scrutiny leaders face regarding diversity. Motivating leaders to use contingent rhetoric may therefore require assurances that it is an appropriate way to talk about diversity and that leaders will not suffer negative repercussions if an employee reacts negatively to this rhetoric type. Evidence that leaders are unaware that contingent rhetoric is more effective than value rhetoric is also suggests it is important to educate leaders about the benefits of contingent rhetoric. Such training may be particularly effective if it emphasizes the importance of attaining diversity goals. Doing so may help leaders overcome their personal fears of appearing prejudiced and instead use the rhetoric type that is most useful for achieving organizational goals.

Strengths, Limitations, and Future Research

We find support for our hypotheses in different samples (company websites, online panel members) and using different methodologies that vary in their strengths and weaknesses (archival, experimental, survey-based). Specifically, Study 1 is high in external validity, but weaker in internal and construct validity; Studies 2 and 3 are high in internal and construct validity, but weaker in external validity; and Study 4 is high in external and construct validity, but weaker in internal validity. Use of multiple methodologies with complementary strengths and

weakness increases confidence in the generalizability of our findings.

At the same time, our findings may not generalize to all samples or settings. We explored a number of potential boundary conditions, including participants' gender, race, and personal beliefs about diversity (online supplement, Appendices S10 & S11). We found only one consistent moderating effect: contingent rhetoric increases perceived goal difficulty among employees with low, but not high, contingent beliefs (i.e., personal beliefs that diversity is only beneficial if the challenges are overcome). Nevertheless, additional moderators may exist. For example, the effects of diversity rhetoric may depend on whether a diversity initiative is new versus well-established. Value rhetoric may be effective early on because it educates employees regarding diversity's benefits. Contingent rhetoric may become more effective once employees have more experience with fostering diversity and are thus receptive to more nuanced messaging. As another example, we define contingent and value rhetoric to include rhetoric that emphasizes diversity is beneficial for any number of reasons, given that limiting diversity rhetoric to one specific rationale does not consistently improve its effectiveness (e.g., the business case or the moral case; Williamson et al., 2008). Nevertheless, our findings may be qualified by different reasons why diversity is beneficial.

Our theory regarding the mechanisms that explain why contingent rhetoric is less common, but more effective, than value rhetoric was largely supported, but additional mechanisms may also contribute to understanding either or both rhetoric types. For example, we originally hypothesized that contingent rhetoric results in more diversity effort than value rhetoric does not only because it results in higher perceptions that diversity goals are difficult, but also because it is perceived as more credible. This prediction is grounded in theory and evidence that messages that emphasize both the pros and the cons of an object are perceived as

more credible, and are thus more persuasive, than messages that emphasize the pros only (e.g., Eisend, 2007). We tested this and a number of other alternative mechanisms in our studies, but none contributed to understanding why contingent rhetoric results in higher levels of diversity effort than value rhetoric does (online supplement, Appendices S3 & S4). Nevertheless, our theorizing may not be comprehensive, in that contingent or value rhetoric affects diversity effort via additional mechanisms or processes.

We compared two diversity rhetoric types, but do not claim they are the only ways leaders talk about diversity. For example, we measured challenge rhetoric in several of our studies. Unsurprisingly, we found leaders seldom use challenge rhetoric and it evokes predominantly negative reactions from employees (online supplement, Appendix S8). As another example, leaders may emphasize diversity is unimportant. Indeed, prior work has compared rhetoric emphasizing diversity is valuable (i.e., multicultural messages) to rhetoric emphasizing diversity is inconsequential (i.e., colorblind messages; e.g., Apfelbaum et al., 2010). We explored colorblind rhetoric in a pilot version of Study 4 and found it is rarely used by leaders and unrelated to diversity effort among employees (online supplement, Appendix S4). Nevertheless, future work should explore the possibility of additional diversity rhetoric types that are either commonly used or result in more diversity effort than contingent rhetoric does.

Future work should also explore the implications of integrating diversity's challenges into other constructs in the diversity literature. Like value rhetoric, a variety of other constructs, including diversity climates, pro-diversity beliefs, and multicultural ideologies, emphasize diversity is beneficial without acknowledging its potential challenges (Leslie, Bono, Kim, & Beaver, 2020; Leslie & Flynn, 2023; McKay & Avery, 2015; van Dick, van Knippenberg, Hagele, Guillaume, & Brodbeck, 2008). We found that acknowledging the challenges of

diversity, in addition to its benefits, increases the effectiveness of leaders' diversity rhetoric. Diversity climates, beliefs, and ideologies that emphasize the benefits of diversity are only achieved if its challenges are overcome may also have stronger positive effects, relative to climates, beliefs, and ideologies that emphasize the benefits of diversity only.

CONCLUSION

Achieving diversity goals requires that employees take action to foster diversity and inclusion. Diversity rhetoric is a tool leaders can use to increase employees' diversity effort, but is characterized by a descriptive-prescriptive paradox. Contingent rhetoric is descriptively less common, but prescriptively more effective, than value rhetoric is. It follows that leaders can increase employees' diversity effort, and thereby help their organizations become more diverse and inclusive, by changing the way they talk about diversity.

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TABLE 1 Descriptive Statistics and Correlations, Study 1[a]

Variables	*M*	*SD*	1	2	3	4	5	6
1. Contingent rhetoric	0.22	0.42						
2. Value rhetoric	0.63	0.49	-.69**					
3. No rhetoric	0.15	0.36	-.22*	-.55**				
4. Revenue (ln)	11.17	0.61	-.03	.02	.01			
5. Diversity webpages	2.80	1.86	.12	.22*	-.44**	.28**		
6. Diversity word count	582.52	637.15	.11	.00	-.13	.18	.21*	
7. Diversity ranking	0.57	0.50	.22*	.05	-.31**	.04	.23*	.13

[a]$N = 100$. The rhetoric variables indicate whether organizations use a given rhetoric type (1 = yes, 0 = no). Revenue (ln) is the natural log of revenues in millions of dollars. Diversity ranking captures whether each organization is (1) or is not (0) ranked as one of the top 500 companies for diversity. *$p < .05$; **$p < .01$

TABLE 2 Regression Results, Study 1[a]

Variables	Comparison: No rhetoric		Comparison: Value rhetoric	
	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4
Step 1				
Contingent rhetoric	2.61 (0.82)**	2.27 (0.89)*	0.87 (0.57)	0.83 (0.58)
Value rhetoric	1.74 (0.69)*	1.45 (0.76)		
No rhetoric			-1.74 (0.69)*	-1.45 (0.76)
Step 2				
Revenue (ln)		0.05 (0.38)		0.05 (0.38)
Diversity webpages		0.12 (0.14)		0.12 (0.14)
Diversity word count		0.00 (0.00)		0.00 (0.00)
χ^2_{model}	12.66**	14.26*	12.66**	14.26*

[a]$N = 100$. Reported values are logit coefficients (*B*) with standard errors in parentheses. The rhetoric variables indicate whether organizations use a given rhetoric type (1 = yes, 0 = no). Revenue (ln) is the natural log of revenues in millions of dollars. The dependent variable is whether each organization is (1) or is not (0) ranked as one of the top 500 companies for diversity. *$p < .05$; **$p < .01$

TABLE 3 Descriptive Statistics and Correlations, Study 2[a]

Variables	1	2	3	4
1. Fear of prejudice	(.96)	-.31**	-.26**	-.29**
2. Message commonness	-.34**	(.96)	.18*	.19*
3. Message effectiveness	-.38**	.29**	(.94)	.53**
4. Likelihood of use	-.38**	.46**	.52**	(.97)
Contingent message: *M* (*SD*)	2.46 (1.48)	4.27 (1.56)	5.00 (1.17)	4.48 (1.71)
Value message: *M* (*SD*)	1.84 (1.00)	5.85 (0.77)	5.22 (1.12)	5.33 (1.35)
Paired-samples *t*-test	5.43**	-10.24**	-1.82	-4.15**

[a]$N = 136$. Correlations for the contingent condition are below the diagonal. Correlations for the value condition are above the diagonal. Reliabilities (α) are in parentheses on the diagonal. Paired-sample *t*-tests indicate if the contingent (1) and value (0) messages differ from one another. Message choice is not included in the correlation table because it varied between participants, whereas all other variables varied within participants. *$p < .05$; **$p < .01$

TABLE 4 Multilevel Regression Results, Study 2[a]

Variables	Prejudice	Commonness	Effectiveness	Likelihood of use	
	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4	Model 5
Step 1					
Message type	0.61 (0.11)**	-1.58 (0.15)**	-0.22 (0.12)	-0.86 (0.19)**	-0.17 (0.18)
Step 2					
Fear of prejudice					-0.16 (0.07)*
Message commonness					0.29 (0.07)**
Message effectiveness					0.57 (0.07)**

[a]N = 136. Reported values are unstandardized multilevel regression coefficients (γ) with standard errors in parentheses. All variables are level-1 variables that capture the within-participant effect of message type (1 = contingent rhetoric, 0 = value rhetoric). *p < .05; **p < .01

TABLE 5 Descriptive Statistics and Correlations, Study 3[a]

Variables	*M*	*SD*	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
1. Contingent rhetoric	0.24	0.43							
2. Value rhetoric	0.26	0.44	-.33**						
3. Challenge rhetoric	0.25	0.43	-.33**	-.34**					
4. No rhetoric	0.25	0.43	-.33**	-.34**	-.33**				
5. Argument strength	4.47	1.58	.13**	.20**	-.30**	-.03	(.97)		
6. Goal difficulty	5.45	0.92	.12**	-.22**	.21**	-.11*	-.10*	(.88)	
7. Leader prejudice	3.07	1.77	-.10*	-.21**	.39**	-.07	-.43**	.24**	(.96)
8. Diversity effort: ideas	3.84	2.32	-.05	.04	.03	-.02	-.05	.10*	.02

[a]N = 503. The rhetoric variables indicate whether participants were in each of the study conditions (1 = yes, 0 = no). Reliabilities (α) are in parentheses on the diagonal. *p < .05; **p < .01

TABLE 6 Regression Results, Study 3[a]

Variables	Strength	Difficulty	Prejudice	Diversity effort: ideas	
	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4	Model 5
Comparison: No rhetoric					
Step 1					
Contingent rhetoric	0.43 (0.19)*	0.36 (0.11)**	-0.12 (0.21)	-0.12 (0.29)	-0.20 (0.30)
Value rhetoric	0.60 (0.19)**	-0.17 (0.11)	-0.44 (0.20)*	0.25 (0.29)	0.34 (0.29)
Challenge rhetoric	-0.75 (0.19)**	0.51 (0.11)**	1.39 (0.21)**	0.21 (0.29)	0.04 (0.31)
Step 2					
Argument strength					-0.08 (0.07)
Goal difficulty					0.30 (0.12)*
Leader prejudice					-0.03 (0.07)
R^2_{model}	.11**	.09**	.16**	.00	.02
Comparison: Value rhetoric					
Step 1					
Contingent rhetoric	-0.17 (0.19)	0.53 (0.11)**	0.32 (0.21)	-0.37 (0.29)	-0.54 (0.30)
Challenge rhetoric	-1.35 (0.19)**	0.68 (0.11)**	1.83 (0.20)**	-0.04 (0.29)	-0.29 (0.32)
No rhetoric	-0.60 (0.19)**	0.17 (0.11)	0.44 (0.20)*	-0.25 (0.29)	-0.34 (0.29)
Step 2					
Argument strength					-0.08 (0.07)
Goal difficulty					0.30 (0.12)*
Leader prejudice					-0.03 (0.07)
R^2_{model}	.11**	.09**	.16**	.00	.02

[a]N = 503. Reported values are unstandardized regression coefficients (b) with standard errors in parentheses. The rhetoric variables indicate study condition (1 = yes, 0 = no). *p < .05; **p < .01

TABLE 7 Descriptive Statistics and Correlations, Study 4[a]

Variables	*M*	*SD*	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
1. Contingent rhetoric	4.67	1.54	(.92)									
2. Value rhetoric	5.37	1.51	.70**	(.98)								
3. Challenge rhetoric	2.10	1.32	-.21**	-.42**	(.96)							
4. Argument strength	4.78	1.29	.47**	.53**	-.31**	(.97)						
5. Goal difficulty	4.57	1.41	.25**	.13**	.01	.07*	(.94)					
6. Minority fairness	5.38	1.35	.13**	.21**	-.13**	.41**	-.25**	(.90)				
7. Rhetoric amount	2.61	1.13	.50**	.55**	-.18**	.50**	.14**	.12**				
8. Male	0.54	0.50	-.05	-.06	.05	-.05	-.04	.11**	.01			
9. White	0.78	0.41	-.07	-.05	.05	.00	-.03	.08*	-.07*	-.04		
10. Diversity effort	4.83	1.41	.41**	.41**	-.26**	.43**	.19**	.03	.30**	-.16**	-.02	(.98)

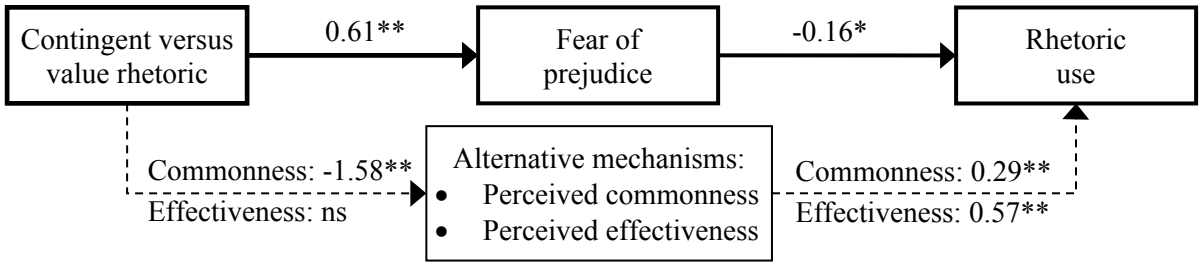
[a]N = 893. Reliabilities (Cronbach's α) are in parentheses on the diagonal. Male and White are dummy variables indicating whether participants belong to these groups (1 = yes, 0 = no). *p < .05; **p < .01

TABLE 8 Regression Results, Study 4[a]

Variables	Argument strength		Goal difficulty		Minority fairness		Diversity effort		
	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4	Model 5	Model 6	Model 7	Model 8	Model 9
Step 1									
Contingent rhetoric	0.17 (0.03)**	0.12 (0.03)**	0.26 (0.04)**	0.25 (0.04)**	-0.03 (0.04)	-0.02 (0.04)	0.25 (0.04)**	0.16 (0.04)**	0.16 (0.04)**
Value rhetoric	0.29 (0.04)**	0.19 (0.04)**	-0.04 (0.05)	-0.06 (0.05)	0.19 (0.04)**	0.19 (0.05)**	0.15 (0.04)**	0.08 (0.04)	0.08 (0.04)
Challenge rhetoric	-0.12 (0.03)**	-0.13 (0.03)**	0.06 (0.04)	0.06 (0.04)	-0.05 (0.04)	-0.05 (0.04)	-0.15 (0.04)**	-0.11 (0.03)**	-0.11 (0.03)**
Step 2									
Argument strength								0.35 (0.04)**	0.34 (0.04)**
Goal difficulty								0.08 (0.03)**	0.09 (0.03)**
Minority fairness								-0.14 (0.03)**	-0.12 (0.04)**
Step 3									
Rhetoric amount		0.34 (0.04)**		0.05 (0.05)		0.01 (0.05)			-0.02 (0.05)
Male		-0.06 (0.07)		-0.11 (0.09)		0.36 (0.09)**			-0.30 (0.08)**
White		0.14 (0.08)		-0.06 (0.11)		0.31 (0.11)**			0.02 (0.10)
R^2_{model}	.31**	.37**	.07**	.07**	.05**	.07**	.21**	.28**	.30**

[a]N = 893. Reported values are unstandardized regression coefficients (b) with standard errors in parentheses. Male and White are dummy variables indicating whether participants belong to these groups (1 = yes, 0 = no). *p < .05; **p < .01

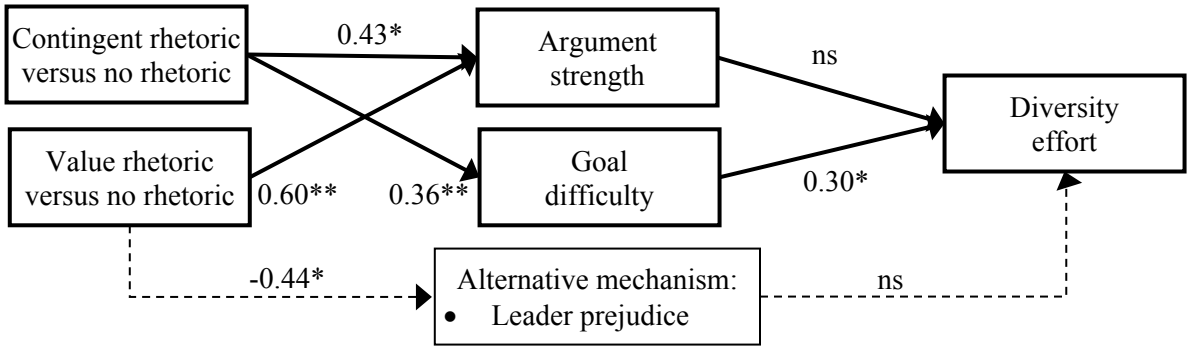
FIGURE 1 Effect of Rhetoric Type on Leader Rhetoric Use, Study 2[a]



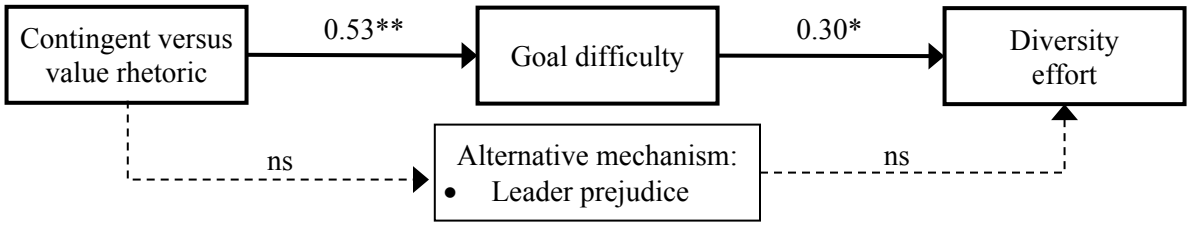
[a] Dashed lines indicate non-hypothesized effects. See Table 4 for the full results. *$p < .01$; ** $p < .05$

FIGURE 2 Effect of Rhetoric Type on Employee Diversity Effort, Study 3[a]

A. Value and contingent rhetoric, relative to no rhetoric

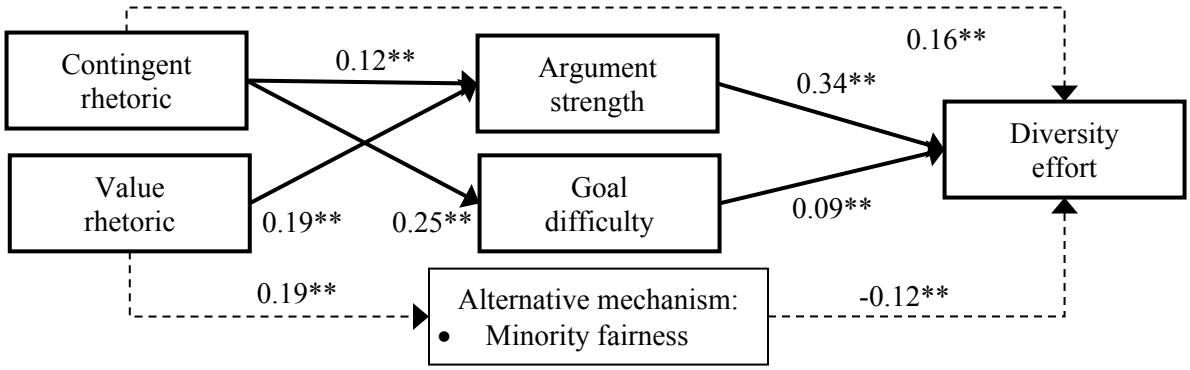


B. Contingent versus value rhetoric



[a] Dashed lines indicate non-hypothesized effects. Argument strength was included in the Figure 2b model, but is not depicted due to non-significant effects. See Table 6 for the full results. *$p < .01$; ** $p < .05$

FIGURE 3 Effect of Rhetoric Type on Employee Diversity Effort, Study 4



[a] Dashed lines indicate non-hypothesized effects. Rhetoric amount, employee gender, and employee race are included as controls. See Table 8 for the full results. *$p < .01$; ** $p < .05$

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