

Psychological work immersion enablers and behavioural indicators: Exploring socio-demographic differences among staff members

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Abstract

Research on surface-level diversity pertaining to differences among gender, age, race and tenure groups regarding their psychological work immersion has been limited in the South African organisational context. The present study explored whether gender, age, race and tenure groups differ significantly in terms of their perceptions of organisational enablers and behavioural indicators of employee engagement as measured by the psychological work immersion scale. The sample was a non-probability sample (N = 1 268) of individuals employed across various South African industries. The sample was predominantly made up of females (74%) and black people (86%) in the early (49%: 21–35 years) and establishment (51%: 36–50 years) career phases. Most individuals in the sample had less than five years of work experience (69%). Tests for independent samples revealed significant differences among the biographical groups on the psychological work immersion enabler and behavioural indicator variables. The results indicated that surface-level diversity characteristics are important to consider in strengthening employees' work immersion as an aspect of employment relations. The differences observed provide valuable insights that could potentially be used by management in the design of business performance and retention strategies.

Key words: organisational enablers, engagement behavioural indicators, psychological work immersion, surface-level diversity

1 Introduction

The management of a diverse workforce in a complex and challenging global business environment forms an essential part of today's employment relations research agenda (Bartram, Boyle, Stanton, Burgess & McDonnell 2015; Boxall 2014). Employment relations in the contemporary workplace are increasingly influenced by managerial concerns about attracting, retaining and engaging diverse groups of workers with scarce skills and talented knowledge workers as part of the talent management agenda (Deloitte 2012; Meister & Willyerd 2010). For many organisations workforce diversity has become integral to business structure and strategy largely because it is seen as an important source of competitive human capital. Scholars also emphasise the

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importance of considering the unique challenges inherent in managing diverse social groups (i.e. diverse in respect of age, gender, race/ethnicity) in South African workplaces as a business imperative (April, Ephraim & Peters 2012; Tshikwatamba 2003). Workforce diversity is considered to influence business performance positively owing to the various perspectives and capabilities each member brings to the team (Daspit, Tillman, Boyd & McKee 2013; Woehr, Arciniega & Poling 2013). Nevertheless, unlocking, engaging and retaining the full potential of employees on all levels in order to achieve improved individual, work and business performance in a post-apartheid culturally diverse South African society remains a core challenge for organisations (Jansen & Roodt 2015).

The challenge of managing and retaining multi-cultural workforces from different race, gender and generational backgrounds has led to a renewed interest in understanding the organisational factors that enable their engagement and alignment to the organisational strategic direction (Martins & Coetzee 2011). Managing diversity and sustaining employee engagement and morale are seen as key talent strategies in achieving positive organisational outcomes such as low turnover intention, employee satisfaction, commitment, trust and goodwill, and performance beyond the call of duty (Bates & Weighart 2014; Deloitte 2012). Research by Deloitte (2012) further indicates that turnover triggers and retention incentives vary significantly across generation (age) and gender groups within the workforce. Companies that adapt their talent and retention strategies to meet the unique expectations and motivations of different employee populations are more likely to retain valuable staff members and improve workforce performance, and as a consequence improve the company's competitive position (Deloitte 2012; Martins & Coetzee 2007, 2011; Torrington, Hall, Taylor & Atkinson 2009).

Research by Martins and Von der Ohe (2006) indicates that surface-level diversity (i.e. differences in easily perceived characteristics such as age, race, gender and tenure for example) manifests as subcultures within an organisation, with each subculture having unique needs and perceptions of organisational factors that influence their members' attitudes and behaviour toward their work, workplace relations and the organisation. Research showed that employees' psychological work immersion is influenced by organisational and individual factors recognised as enablers of employees' performance and engagement, such as manager credibility, performance feedback, strategic alignment, an enabling work environment, employee motivation and commitment (Veldsman 2013; Veldsman & Coetzee 2014). Employees' perceptions of these factors represent deep-level or psychological diversity characteristics that are recognised as important factors in shaping people's individual mindsets about their organisational lives and that people or subcultures commonly share (Martins & Coetzee 2011; Woehr et al 2013). Research has shown that deep-level psychological diversity over time has a more important effect on team and organisational performance than surface-level (demographic) diversity (Woehr et al 2013). However, understanding deep-level diversity in terms of surface-level diversity characteristics within the workplace is important in determining similarity within groups or subcultures regarding organisational factors that influence employees' attitudes, behaviour and performance (Martins & Coetzee 2011; Robbins & Judge 2011; Woehr et al 2013). Differences in perceptions reflect the unique needs, problems and experiences of subgroups (Martins & Von der Ohe 2006) that may be detrimental to employment relations and affect the overall performance and effectiveness of the organisation (Martins & Coetzee 2011; Robbins & Judge 2011).

2 Research objective

Although research highlights the importance of considering workforce diversity in the employment relations and management domain of businesses, research on surface-level diversity pertaining to differences among gender, age, race and tenure groups regarding their psychological work immersion as explained by the organisational and individual factors that enable their performance and engagement has been limited in the South African organisational context (Jacobs, Renard & Snelgar 2014; Martins & Coetzee 2007, 2011). The objective of the present study was therefore to determine whether gender, age, race and tenure groups differ significantly regarding their perceptions of organisational people performance enablers and behavioural indicators of employee engagement. People performance enablers and behavioural indicators of engagement represent individuals' psychological work immersion (Veldsman & Coetzee 2014). However, research on the construct of psychological work immersion and socio-demographic differences has been limited in the South African organisational context (Veldsman & Coetzee 2014). The present study could possibly fill the gap in the research and contribute valuable insights that could inform organisational talent management initiatives focusing on engaging the talent and potential of a diverse multicultural workforce.

3 Psychological work immersion: Organisational enablers of employee engagement

Psychological work immersion relates to individuals' state of engagement in their work and performance roles as a product of organisational performance enablers and individual engagement behaviours (i.e. motivation, work absorption and commitment) (Veldsman & Coetzee 2014). A pervasive state of deep psychological work immersion results from the individual's emotional, cognitive and physical identification with and psychological attachment to the work experience during role performance (Kahn 1990; Veldsman & Coetzee 2014). When fully immersed in their work and performance roles, individuals bring a positive psychological presence to their work; they feel intrinsically motivated by and are fully (emotionally, mentally and physically) attentive, engaged, committed and focused (absorbed) while performing their work roles (Kahn 1990; Veldsman & Coetzee 2014). Psychologically immersed employees tend to work hard because they feel motivated to do so; they are drawn to work and demonstrate a passion for and a holistic engagement in their work (Schaufeli & Bakker 2010; Van Beek, Hu, Schaufeli, Taris and Schreurs 2012). As an outcome of psychological work immersion, employee engagement is seen to benefit the organisation because of its positive association with desired organisational outcomes such as high levels of commitment, motivation and psychological health, low turnover intention, low absenteeism, increased productivity, higher company profits and increased individual performance and job satisfaction (Field & Buitendach 2011; Jacobs et al 2014; Mendes & Stander 2011; Nasomboon 2014).

Self-determination theory (Deci & Ryan 2000) offers an explanation for the engagement behaviours that flow from individuals' psychological work immersion. The theory states that human beings, as growth-oriented organisms, are predisposed to engage in interesting and enjoyable activities, to seek ways of optimally using their capacities, to search for connectedness with others, and to integrate their experiences (both intrapersonal and interpersonal) into a relative unity (Van Beek et al 2012). Individual behaviour is motivationally regulated, with intrinsically motivated individuals engaging in an activity for its own sake, acting with a full sense of volition and experiencing the activity as interesting, enjoyable and satisfying. While intrinsically

motivated behaviour is self-determined, externally motivated individuals do not perceive work as exclusively interesting, enjoyable and satisfying, but rather as a means to earn a living. External contingencies, for example, threats of punishment and material and social rewards serve as motivators of externally regulated behaviour (Gagné & Deci 2005; Van Beek et al 2012).

Self-determination theory (Deci & Ryan 2000) further posits that the interaction between individuals and their environment forms the basis for predictions about motivation and behaviour, and the extent to which personal growth takes place. The social (or work) environment is seen as influencing the growth-oriented tendency of individuals by either facilitating or undermining intrinsic motivation and personal growth (Deci & Ryan 2000; Van Beek et al 2012). Intrinsic motivation and engaging behaviour are supported or thwarted by fulfilling individuals' psychological need to experience positive relationships with others, mutual respect, caring and reliance (relatedness), their need to accomplish challenging tasks successfully (competence) and autonomy, that is, their need to experience freedom of choice and the opportunity to initiate behaviour (Deci & Ryan 2000).

Research provides evidence that employee engagement is cultivated by a supportive or enabling work environment (organisational and social support, job resources and growth opportunities) (Coetzer & Rothmann 2007), and organisational factors such as manager and leader behaviour, feedback and recognition, team effectiveness, performance management, and career development and advancement (Dierdorff & Ellington 2012; Jordan & Audia 2012; Mafini & Pooe 2013; Nasomboon 2014). Veldsman and Coetzee (2014) describe six organisational factors (summarised in Table 1) that are generally seen as enablers of individuals' psychological work immersion: manager credibility, appreciative feedback, intrateam effectiveness, strategic connection, enabling environment, and individual congruence. Apart from being important for supporting employees' performance (Veldsman 2013), the six organisational factors were shown to function as significant predictors or enablers of employees' engagement behaviours (absorption, commitment and intrinsic motivation). Veldsman and Coetzee (2014) found that the six factors predicted the extent to which the employee (1) is involved in and feels attached to his/her work (psychological absorption), (2) identifies with the organisation and what it stands for (commitment) and (3) feels intrinsically motivated (i.e. feels energised by the work and experiences a high level of enjoyment from being engaged in the work).

Table 1
Organisational enablers of employee engagement

Performance enabler	Description
Manager credibility	The extent to which managers are able to connect employees psychologically to the organisational purpose by treating them in a respectful, fair and consistent manner and establishing a trust relationship
Appreciative feedback	The perceived meaningfulness of performance discussions and the extent to which employees receive feedback on their performance and strengths
Intrateam effectiveness	The extent to which the employee perceives co-workers as competent, being treated with dignity and respect and being supported by members of the team in achieving goals
Strategic connection	The perceived connection between the organisational goals and the expected contributions of employees
Enabling environment	The extent to which the employee perceives the policies, procedures and physical environment in the organisation as enabling for work performance
Individual congruence	The employee's perceived fit between her/his strengths, competencies and skills and the requirements of the job

Veldsman (2013) states that the physical presence and engagement behaviours that flow from the employee's sense of psychological work immersion are dependent on three conditions of congruency, namely (1) the alignment or congruence between the employee's expectations of the work environment and the organisation's espoused and enacted conventions, practices and values, (2) whether the employee's work activities are seen to contribute to the team and organisational performance, and (3) whether the espoused conventions, practices and values of the work environment are relatively consistent with the actual enacted conventions, practices and values demonstrated in the work environment. In this regard, manager credibility and trustworthiness help create a psychologically and morally safe work climate in which innovation and risk-taking can be facilitated (Jiang, Lin & Lin 2010; Veldsman & Coetzee 2014).

Research provides evidence that leader behaviour and trustworthiness have important implications for job performance, organisational citizen behaviour, organisational commitment and job satisfaction (Dirks & Ferrin 2002; Roussin & Webber 2012). Moreover, alignment of organisational and team goals and values and the employee's performance goals and values is deemed crucial for psychological identification and engagement with the work and organisation (Aggarwal & D'Souza 2012; Veldsman & Coetzee 2014). Performance feedback has been related to enhanced employee self-efficacy, problem solving behaviour and motivation (Jordan & Audia 2012). Performance management has also been found to enhance employees' organisational commitment (Lin, Lin & Lin 2012). From the perspective of self-determination theory (Deci & Ryan 2000), positive team interactions and relations are seen to relate to stronger psychological identification with the workplace, the job, co-workers and the organisation as a whole (Rothmann 2014). The perceived proper implementation and management of human resource policies and procedures have been shown to increase engagement, organisational commitment and low turnover intention (Juhdi et al 2012; Nasomboon 2014).

Research suggests that individuals from various demographic backgrounds (gender, age, race and tenure) may differ significantly regarding their perceptions of organisational factors associated with their engagement, motivation and commitment (Martins & Coetzee 2007, 2011; Swart 2009). However, this research has been limited and the findings are inconclusive. For example, Lumley (2009) and Tladinyane (2012) found that men and women differ regarding their organisational commitment, with men showing higher levels of commitment than their female counterparts. While women were also found to have lower engagement levels than men (Tladinyane 2012), a study by Takawira (2012) showed women to be significantly higher on engagement than their male counterparts. Takawira (2012) also found no significant differences between age and race groups on engagement and commitment. Job tenure was associated with intrinsic motivation, but not age and gender (Zhou, Hirst & Shipton 2012). Bowling, Wang and Li (2012) indicated no relationship between age, gender and tenure and job attitudes and organisational commitment (Bowling et al 2012). In view of the dearth of studies on differences between the demographic groups in respect of the psychological work immersion construct and its subdimensions, the present study focused on addressing the gap by exploring how gender, age, race and tenure groups differ regarding their perceptions of the six organisational work immersion enabling factors (manager credibility, appreciative feedback, intrateam effectiveness, strategic connection, enabling environment) and the engagement behavioural indicators of intrinsic motivation, absorption and commitment.

4 Research method

A cross-sectional, non-experimental quantitative survey design using primary data was used to fulfil the research objectives. Cross-sectional designs are relevant to investigations where the prevalence of a specific phenomenon (differences in psychological work immersion in the case of this study) is being measured at one point in time in a defined population (as was the case in this study) (Bryman & Bell 2011).

4.1 Participants

The participants were a non-probability sample (N = 1268) of individuals employed across various industries, including manufacturing (17%), financial services (14%), information technology (16%) and the non-profit sectors (53%). The sample consisted predominantly of 74% females (males: 26%) and 86% black people (14%: white people). In terms of age, the sample participants were relatively equally divided between those in the early career phase (49%: 21 to 35 years) and those in the establishment career phase (41%: 36 to 50 years). In terms of organisational tenure, the sample was predominantly represented by participants who had less than five years of work experience (69%) and those who had five to ten years (31%) of work experience.

4.2 Measuring instruments

Participants completed the psychological work immersion scale [PWIS] (Veldsman 2013). The PWIS is a 30-item (with nine subscales) Likert-type measure (1 = never; 4 = always) of individuals' perceptions of six organisational engagement enabler indicators (manager credibility, appreciative feedback, strategic connection, intrateam effectiveness, enabling environment and individual congruence) and three engagement behavioural indicators (commitment, absorption and motivation). Examples of items for the *people performance enablers*: manager credibility (3 items, e.g. "Does your manager treat everybody fairly and consistently?"); appreciative feedback (3 items, e.g. "How often does your manager give feedback on how well you are doing?"); strategic connection (3 items, e.g. "How often does management talk about what the organisation needs to be good at in order to achieve its goals?"); intrateam effectiveness (3 items, e.g. "Do the people in your section help and support each other when you have to achieve a goal?"); enabling environment (3 items, e.g. "Do the policies and procedures in the organisation enable you to do your job?"); and individual congruence (6 items, e.g. "To what extent does the work you do help your organisation to achieve its goals?"). Examples of items for *psychological attachment*: commitment (3 items, e.g. "Do you believe in the organisation and what it stands for?"), absorption (3 items, e.g. "Do you ever find that you want to continue with your work in your free time?"), and employee motivation (3 items, e.g. "Do you feel happy and cheerful when you are doing your work?") Veldsman and Coetzee (2014) report acceptable internal consistency reliability and construct validity of the PWIS in the South African organisational context. In the present study, confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) confirmed the validity of the PWIS structural model for the purposes of this study.

4.3 Research procedure

Permission for the study was granted by the management of the participating organisations. Consent was obtained from individual participants. Data were collected at the premises of the participating organisations using a secure online platform after permission and ethical clearance for the research had been obtained. Each

questionnaire was accompanied by a covering letter that stated the purpose of the research and explained the nature of the data to be collected. The covering letter was distributed by the senior leadership team who were sponsoring the research initiative internally. In terms of ethical considerations, the covering letter invited respondents to participate voluntarily in the study and assured them that their individual responses would remain anonymous and confidential. Individual participation was anonymous and all responses were only available to the researcher who collected the data.

4.4 Statistical analysis

Preliminary statistical analysis included testing the measurement model by means of confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) and checking for common method variance due to the cross-sectional nature of the research design. The measurement model was tested at the item level to verify whether the PWIS scale items were adequate indicators of the underlying construct. The measurement model showed nine latent factors (i.e. manager credibility, appreciative feedback, intrateam effectiveness, strategic connection, individual congruence, enabling environment, intrinsic motivation, commitment and absorption) and provided a good fit to the data (CMIN/df = 3.519; $p = .0001$; CFI = .92; RMSEA = .045; SRMR = .04). The structural model of the PWIS was therefore regarded as valid for the purposes of this study.

Based on the suggestions of Podsakoff, MacKenzie, Lee and Podsakoff (2003), Harman's one-factor test and CFA were used to check for common method variance. The one-factor solution for the PWIS showed that the PWIS construct accounted for 44% of the covariance among the PWS variables. When the nine PWIS variables were loaded onto a single construct in the CFA model, the fit indices showed that the single factor did not fit the model adequately (CMIN/df = 10.39; $p = .0001$; CFI = .93; RMSEA = .09). The one-factor results suggested that common method bias did not pose a threat to the data. Common method variance is variance attributed to the measurement method rather than the constructs of interest and may bias the estimates of true relationships between variables as a result of data being self-reported and collected through the same questionnaire.

Pearson product-moment correlations were calculated to assess the nature and direction of the relationship between the variables of the PWIS and the biographical variables (gender, age, race and tenure). The t-test for independent samples was used to compare the mean differences between the biographical groups (gender: male vs female; age: <35 years vs >35 years; race: black [African, coloured, Indian] vs white; tenure: <5 years in employment vs >5 years in employment). In order to counter the probability of a type I error, the significance value was set at the 95% confidence interval level ($p \leq 0.05$). The practical significance of the significant mean differences between the biographical groups was interpreted by using Cohen's guidelines (1992): $d \leq .20$ –.49 (small practical effect); $d \leq .50$ –.79 (moderate practical effect); and $d \geq .80$ (large practical effect).

5 Results

5.1 Descriptive statistics and correlations

As shown in Table 2, the PWIS obtained acceptable internal consistency reliability coefficients except for results for the individual congruence subscale (.39). The engagement enablers of individual congruence and enabling environment showed significant correlations with age, gender and race (r range: $r \geq .07$ to $r \leq .13$; $p \leq .01$;

small practical effect), and enabling environment and also with tenure ($r = .08$; $p = .003$; small practical effect). Intrateam effectiveness correlated significantly with age ($r = .05$; $p = .05$; small practical effect), appreciative feedback with race ($r = -.06$; $p = .04$; small practical effect) and manager credibility with tenure ($r = -.06$; $p = .03$; small practical effect). The three engagement behavioural indicators correlated significantly with age, gender and race (r range: $r \geq .04$ to $r \leq .16$; $p \leq .05$; small practical effect). Absorption did not correlate significantly with gender.

Table 2
Descriptive statistics: Means, standard deviations, internal consistency reliability and bivariate correlations

	Variables	M	SD	Raykov's rho	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13
1	Age				-												
2	Gender				-.01	-											
3	Race				.09***	.32***	-										
4	Tenure				.37***	.01	.05*	-									
5	Manager credibility	2.99	.84	.84	.02	-.05	-.04	-.06*	-								
6	Appreciative feedback	2.85	.86	.78	.05	.01	-.06*	-.01	.52***	-							
7	Intrateam effectiveness	3.08	.64	.73	.05*	-.01	.01	.04	.39***	.33***	-						
8	Strategic connection	3.06	.66	.76	.03	-.01	-.05	.001	.54***	.53***	.37***	-					
9	Individual congruence	3.43	.61	.39	.13***	-.09***	-.08**	-.03	.28***	.19***	.25***	.24***	-				
10	Enabling environment	2.83	.72	.57	.07***	-.11***	-.08**	.08**	.44***	.36***	.32***	.48***	.25***	-			
11	Intrinsic motivation	3.19	.66	.70	.11***	-.07*	-.16***	.02	.38***	.31***	.35***	.39***	.39***	.39***	-		
12	Commitment	3.23	.69	.77	.16***	-.06*	-.13***	.04	.50***	.42***	.38***	.56***	.38***	.45***	.56***	-	
13	Absorption	2.95	.54	.60	.07*	-.04	-.06*	.03	.27***	.27***	.26***	.35***	.25***	.28***	.42***	.44***	-

Notes: N = 1 268. *** $p \leq .001$ – statistically significant. ** $p \leq .01$ – statistically significant. * $p \leq .05$ – statistically significant

5.2 Tests for significant mean differences

The significant differences observed between the various biographical subgroups on the PWIS variables are reported in Table 3. The means and standard deviations for the biographical groups are reported in Table 4.

5.2.1 Gender

It is evident from Tables 3 and 4 that the female participants obtained significantly higher mean scores than the males on appreciative feedback ($M = 2.93$ vs $M = 2.72$; $p \leq .001$; $d = .24$, moderate practical effect) and strategic connection ($M = 3.13$ vs $M = 2.98$; $p \leq .001$; $d = .23$, moderate practical effect). The males scored significantly higher than the females on enabling environment ($M = 2.95$ vs $M = 2.81$; $p \leq .01$; $d = .20$, small practical effect).

5.2.2 Age

Tables 3 and 4 show that the participants who were older than 35 years scored significantly higher than those younger than 35 years on appreciative feedback ($p \leq .05$; $d = .17$; small practical effect), intrateam effectiveness ($p \leq .05$; $d = .14$; small practical effect), individual congruence ($p \leq .001$; $d = .30$; moderate practical effect), enabling

environment ($p \leq .05$; $d = .20$; small practical effect), intrinsic motivation ($p \leq .001$; $d = .28$; moderate practical effect), commitment ($p \leq .001$; $d = .36$; moderate practical effect), and absorption ($p \leq .01$; $d = .17$; small practical effect).

5.2.3 Race

As shown in Tables 3 and 4, the black participants scored significantly higher than their white counterparts on appreciative feedback ($p \leq .001$; $d = .32$; moderate practical effect), strategic connection ($p \leq .01$; $d = .24$; moderate practical effect), intrinsic motivation ($p \leq .001$; $d = .30$; moderate practical effect), and absorption ($p \leq .01$; $d = .16$; small practical effect). The white participants scored significantly higher than the black participants on manager credibility ($p \leq .01$; $d = .11$; small practical effect) and enabling environment ($p \leq .001$; $d = .36$; moderate practical effect).

Table 3
Independent samples t-tests: Significant differences

Source of difference	F	t	df	Mean difference	Cohen d
Manager credibility					
Race	1.40	-2.30*	1 149	-.16	.11
Appreciative feedback					
Gender	12.26***	-3.67***	1 164	-.21	.24
Age	3.39	-2.13*	1 265	-.10	.17
Race	.58	3.62***	1 149	.27	.32
Intrateam effectiveness					
Age	4.26*	-2.47*	1 265	-.09	.14
Strategic connection					
Gender	1.38	-3.51***	1 164	-.15	.23
Race	.94	2.68**	1 149	.15	.24
Individual congruence					
Age	29.02***	-5.26***	1 265	-.18	.30
Enabling environment					
Gender	1.06	2.81**	1 164	.13	.20
Age	.012	-2.03*	1 265	-.09	.20
Race	16.43***	-4.03***	1 149	-.24	.36
Tenure	.80	-3.23***	1 263	-.14	.21
Intrinsic motivation					
Age	2.01	-4.90***	1 265	-.18	.28
Race	.01	3.68***	1 149	.20	.30
Commitment					
Age	15.99***	-6.63***	1 265	-.25	.36
Tenure	4.47*	-2.49*	1 263	-.11	.15
Absorption					
Age	2.26	-3.07**	1 265	-.09	.17
Race	4.35*	2.10*	1 149	.10	.16

Notes: *** $p \leq .001$ – statistically significant. ** $p \leq .01$ – statistically significant. * $p \leq .05$ – statistically significant.

5.2.4 Tenure

As shown in Tables 3 and 4, the tenure groups differed only in terms of enabling environment, with those with more than five years of experience scoring significantly higher than those with less than five years' tenure ($M = 2.93$ vs $M = 2.78$; $p \leq .001$; $d = .21$, small practical effect).

Table 4
Descriptive statistics: means and standards deviations

	M/SD	Gender		Age		Race		Tenure	
		Male (n = 298)	Female (n = 868)	<35 years (n = 619)	>35 years (n = 649)	Black (n = 994)	White (n = 157)	<5 years (n = 878)	>5 years (n = 387)
Manager credibility	M	2.98	3.05	2.98	3.02	3.08*	3.17*	3.01	2.98
	SD	.90	.81	.84	.84	.84	.77	.84	.86
Appreciative feedback	M	2.72***	2.93***	2.80*	2.90*	2.90***	2.63***	2.86	2.83
	SD	.92	.83	.87	.84	.86	.81	.86	.86
Intrateam effectiveness	M	3.06	3.09	3.03*	3.12*	3.09	3.04	3.06	3.12
	SD	.65	.63	.67	.61	.64	.61	.65	.61
Strategic connection	M	2.98***	3.13***	3.03	3.09	3.11**	2.96**	3.05	3.10
	SD	.67	.63	.66	.64	.64	.61	.65	.67
Individual congruence	M	3.49	3.43	3.34***	3.52***	3.44	3.48	3.44	3.40
	SD	.58	.60	.65	.55	.61	.53	.62	.57
Enabling environment	M	2.95**	2.81**	2.78*	2.87*	2.82***	3.06***	2.78***	2.93***
	SD	.70	.72	.71	.72	.72	.60	.72	.71
Intrinsic motivation	M	3.17	3.23	3.09***	3.27***	3.24***	3.04***	3.17	3.23
	SD	.70	.63	.67	.63	.64	.68	.66	.65
Commitment	M	3.21	3.29	3.11***	3.36***	3.27	3.30	3.21*	3.31*
	SD	.73	.66	.73	.64	.67	.65	.71	.66
Absorption	M	2.96	2.96	2.90**	2.99**	2.97*	2.88*	2.94	2.99
	SD	.57	.53	.55	.52	.52	.60	.55	.50

Notes: N = 1 268. Gender (no answer = 102). Race (no answer = 117). *** $p \leq .001$ – statistically significant difference. ** $p \leq .01$ – statistically significant difference. * $p \leq .05$ – statistically significant difference.

Because the most significant differences on the PWIS variables were observed for the race groups, a cross-tabulation was also done to observe how the gender, age and tenure groups were spread among the race groups. Table 5 shows that the majority of the males and females were black people. The younger and older age groups were relatively evenly spread among the black and white participants. The participants with less than five years' tenure predominated in both the black and white groups.

Table 5
Cross-tabulation: Frequency spread of gender, age and tenure among the black and white participants

Biographical variable	Black (n = 994)		White (n = 157)		Total
	N	%	N	%	
Gender					
Male	205	21.2	93	47.0	298
Female	763	78.8	105	53.0	868
Total	968	100	198	100	1 166
Age					
≤ 35 years (21–35 years)	563	50.7	56	35.7	619
≥ 36 years (36–50+ years)	548	49.3	101	64.3	649
Total	1 111	100	157	100	1 268
Tenure					
≤ 5 years (1–5 years)	791	71.2	87	55.4	878
≥ 6 years (6–10 years)	320	28.8	70	44.6	390
Total	1 111	100	157	100	1 268

Notes: N=1 268. Gender (no answer=102). Race (no answer=117).

6 Discussion

The present study tried to determine how gender, age, race and tenure groups differed regarding their psychological work immersion as measured by their perceptions of the six organisational performance enabling factors (manager credibility, appreciative feedback, intrateam effectiveness, strategic connection, enabling environment) and the engagement behavioural indicators of intrinsic motivation, absorption and commitment. Several differences were observed and these are discussed below.

6.1 Gender differences

Contrary to previous research by Swart (2009), female participants had more positive perceptions than males regarding appreciative feedback from management (i.e. meaningful discussions, recognition and praise for doing a good job) and their strategic connection (i.e. discussions by management on the strengths of the organisation and what would be required to achieve its goals, and the setting of realistic and clear performance goals) (Veldsman & Coetzee 2014). These findings corroborate previous South African-based research by Martins and Coetzee (2011), which indicated that female employees tend to attach greater value than male employees to organisational values and practices relating to employee self-development, seeking feedback from others, developing new skills, and seeking out growth and development opportunities through performance goals. Research indicated that performance feedback relates to enhanced employee self-efficacy, problem-solving behaviour and motivation (Jordan & Audia 2012). However, the male participants felt more positive than the females about perceiving the company to have an enabling environment (i.e. perceiving the company policies and procedures and job resources to enable the successful execution of jobs and feeling safe and secure in the work environment) (Veldsman & Coetzee 2014). The findings corroborate research by Swart (2009) in the South African context, which showed that males tend to be more positive about organisational practices than their female counterparts. Swart (2009) found, for example, that female employees recorded lower satisfaction than male employees with practices such as management communication, alignment of employees with organisation mission and vision, and the physical work environment. Although differences between the male and female participants were observed in terms of the engagement enabling factors, no differences were observed in terms of the engagement behavioural indicators of intrinsic motivation, commitment and absorption. These findings are contrary to the findings of South African-based studies by Tladinyane (2012) and Takawira (2012), which concluded that men and women tend to differ regarding their levels of engagement and commitment.

6.2 Age differences

The older participants (>35 years) were more positive than the younger participants (< 35 years) about receiving appreciative feedback from management, intrateam effectiveness (i.e. the perception of competent co-workers, the team having the right combination of strengths to do the job, and collegial support), individual congruence (i.e. knowing one's own strengths and those of one's co-workers, having the skills to do the job and to support organisational goals), enabling environment (perceiving the company to have job-supportive or enabling policies and procedures), intrinsic motivation (i.e. feeling energised and happy when performing work), commitment (i.e. believing in what the organisation stands for, identifying with the organisation and its

goals) and absorption (i.e. being engrossed in and enjoying one's work to the extent that one forgets about time when working) (Veldsman & Coetzee 2014). The findings corroborate research by Martins and Coetzee (2007), which indicated that employees under the age of 35 years are more dissatisfied with organisational practices than older employees. Meister and Willyerd (2010) also pointed out that employees belonging to Generation Y (under the age of 35 years) tend to be more critical of organisational practices than the older groups as a result of differing values and needs. Ferreira, Basson and Coetzee (2010) also found that older employees tend to be more committed to the organisation and their jobs than their younger counterparts.

6.3 Race differences

The results indicated that the black participants were more positive than the white employees about receiving appreciative feedback from management and having discussions with management about the strengths of the organisation and what would be required to achieve its goals, as well as the setting of realistic and clear performance goals by management (strategic connection) (Veldsman & Coetzee 2014). Contrary to research by Takawira (2012), which found no differences between races in terms of engagement levels in the South African context, the black participants indicated higher levels of intrinsic motivation and absorption than their white counterparts. The race differences could probably be attributed to post-apartheid affirmative action policies and practices favouring the support and development of black employees in South African organisations. Research findings by Martins and Coetzee (2011) also indicated that black employees tend to place greater value than white employees on performance feedback. Research by Veldsman and Coetzee (2014) also shows that engagement enablers such as appreciative feedback and strategic connection practices by management positively predict the engagement behavioural indicators (intrinsic motivation, commitment and absorption) which could offer an explanation for the higher levels of intrinsic motivation and absorption of the black participants. The finding that the white participants were more positive than their black counterparts about manager credibility (i.e. the perception that management is treating everyone fairly and with respect) and enabling environment (job supportive policies and procedures) is in agreement with research by Martins and Coetzee (2007), which described comparatively negative perceptions by black employees regarding these aspects.

6.4 Tenure

The results indicated that those participants with more than five years of work experience were more positive than those with less than five years of work experience about the company's creating an enabling environment (job-supportive resources, policies and procedures). This finding is in agreement with South African-based research by Van Dyk (2011), which showed that employees with longer tenure tend to be more satisfied with their jobs than those with less tenure.

7 Implications, recommendations and conclusions

Overall, various significant differences were observed between the biographical subgroups which suggest that surface-level diversity characteristics are important to consider in strengthening employees' psychological work immersion as an aspect of employment relations in the organisation. The cross-tabulation showed that black people and female employees with less than five years of work experience

predominated in the sample. This aspect could have influenced the nature of the observed differences between the biographical groups. Race differences were observed in terms of almost all of the people performance enablers and the engagement behavioural indicators. The findings suggest that in the light of employment equity and affirmative action practices, the differing needs and values of especially the black and female participants need to be considered in retention and business performance strategies. Gender differences were especially observed in terms of the performance enablers (appreciative feedback, strategic connection and enabling environment), all of which relate to organisational enabling practices which might potentially influence the satisfaction and work immersion levels of male and female employees. Management should consider these differences in their performance management practices, policies and procedures.

Age differences were evident in the significantly less positive perceptions of the younger employees (<35 years) regarding the work immersion enablers (appreciative feedback, intrateam effectiveness, individual congruence, enabling environment) and the three engagement behavioural indicators, which suggest that the younger employees feel less aligned with and supported by the team and organisation, and less psychologically immersed in their work in general. Consequently, they might be more prone to turnover behaviour if management fails to consider their unique needs as individuals relatively new to the world of work and in the process of establishing themselves in their careers (Schreuder & Coetzee 2011). Finally, tenure differences should be considered in regard to employees' perceptions of job-supportive resources, policies and procedures, especially for employees (and, as suggested by the cross-tabulation results, black females) with less than five years of work experience who might be in need of more focused organisational support initiatives such as mentoring and coaching.

In conclusion, the results provided supportive evidence for the need to consider surface-level diversity characteristics in enhancing employees' psychological work immersion and possible performance, engagement and retention in the organisation. The differences observed provide valuable insights that could potentially be used by management in the design of business performance and retention strategies. Diversity management programmes generally support business performance and staff retention (April et al 2012). Such programmes should consider increasing understanding of the unique experiences of diverse socio-demographic groups regarding organisational factors influencing their performance and engagement behaviours. Managers should consider the findings of this study in stimulating the psychological work immersion of employees. The people performance enablers of psychological work immersion relate to empowering human resource and employee relations practices that promote engagement behaviours. Research provides evidence that the practices per se do not necessarily influence employee behaviour but that employees' unique experiences of how these practices are enacted contribute to their performance and engagement behaviours (Kotze, Van der Westhuizen & Nel 2014). Diversity management programmes should therefore consider the training of management in the psychological work immersion constructs and social diversity trends discussed in this study.

However, certain limitations of the research design should be considered in the interpretation of the results. The study was cross-sectional in nature and the results can only be interpreted in the context of the organisational sample groups that participated in the study. Future replication studies should consider obtaining broader and more equal representation of the various biographical groups. The structural equivalence of

the PWIS should be assessed for the different biographical groups in order to strengthen the validity of the findings. Testing for measurement invariance of the PWIS and differential item functioning in future studies could help to ascertain whether the differences obtained are indicative of true differences between the groups and not artificial differences due to scale properties. Notwithstanding these limitations, this exploratory study added value when considering the paucity of much-needed research on surface-level diversity characteristics in the diverse multicultural South African employment context.

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