



Unequal solidarity? Towards a norm-critical approach to welfare logics



Lotte Holck, Sara Louise Muhr*

Copenhagen Business School, Department of Organization, Kilevej 14A, 4, 2000 Frederiksberg C, Denmark

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ABSTRACT

Due to the fact that immigration in Denmark is a more recent phenomenon, diversity management has had a much shorter history in politics as well as in business, and has not yet been institutionalized to the same degree as in for example North America, from where the concept originates. When crossing the Atlantic, the concept of diversity management merged with Danish universal welfare logics that offer a particular view on equality as sameness together with solidarity through corporate social responsibility. Drawing on 94 employee narratives about difference in a Danish workplace renowned for its diversity work, this article argues that a translation of the original American concept has taken place that turns diversity management into an ambiguous corporate activity when practised through Danish welfare logics. Paradoxically, corporate practices of social responsibility aimed at fostering equal opportunities obstruct successful labour-market integration, as differences are assimilated and marginalized rather than valued and respected. Economic redistribution is thus at the cost of recognition of difference contained in the business case of diversity. In this article we explore how difference can be reintroduced into the Danish welfare logics to balance the simultaneous need for redistribution and recognition of difference, which goes through aligning diversity management with critical scholarship by means of a norm-critical approach.

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1. Introduction

Ethnic diversity in the Danish labour market is increasing. However, despite several decades of active labour-market policies aimed at integrating ethnic-minority citizens, minorities are overrepresented in low-skilled and temporary jobs, underrepresented in management positions, and more likely than members of the majority ethnic group to face unemployment (Andersen, Andersen, Olsen, Ploug, & Sabiers, 2015; Ejrnæs, 2012; Rennison, 2009; Romani, Holck, Holgersson, & Muhr, 2016; see also Ortlieb & Sieben, 2014; Siim, 2013 for international comparison). These macro trends are also reflected in the micro situation in organizations, as unequal opportunity structures, and the inequality that accompanies them, often endure, even in organizations committed to diversity and equality (Acker, 2006; Holck, 2016a, 2016b; Holvino & Kamp, 2009; Risberg & Søderberg, 2008; Larsen, 2011; Marfelt & Muhr, 2016). In this way, Danish (as well as international) organizations spend a lot of resources on diversity

management initiatives, which seem to have little effect in creating a fertile ground for equal opportunities (Al Ariss, Vassilopoulou, Özbilgin, & Game, 2013; Dobbin, Soohan, & Kalev, 2011; Dover et al., 2016; Ghorashi & Sabelis, 2013; Holck, Muhr, & Villesèche, 2016; Jonsen, Tatli, Özbilgin, & Bell, 2013; Kalev, Dobbin, & Kelly, 2006). This paper investigates the question of why – despite good intentions and inclusive labour-market schemes – Danish organizations still struggle with integrating ethnic-minority employees in the workforce.

A critical body of diversity literature has successfully demonstrated how diversity management as a managerial practice is shaped and interpreted through social power hierarchies and by essentializing otherness in favour of majority employees (e.g. Ahonen et al., 2014; Boogaard & Roggeband, 2010; Ghorashi & Sabelis, 2013; Omanović, 2013; Schwabenland & Tomlinson, 2015; Zandoni & Janssens, 2015). This paper departs from this critical argument and focuses on the historical-political aspect of these power dynamics. More specifically, we show how the precarious minority position in the Danish labour market as well as in Danish organizations is reproduced and sustained by two distinct and entwined logics behind the Danish welfare model: 1) *equality as sameness*, which fosters assimilation and a preference for

* Corresponding author.

E-mail addresses: lho.ioa@cbs.dk (L. Holck), slm.ioa@cbs.dk (S.L. Muhr).

similarity; and 2) *solidarity as social responsibility*, which encourages companies to act responsibly by taking in allegedly marginalized minorities on state-subsidized schemes. By critically analysing how these two welfare logics play out and influence the way minorities are perceived – and thereby constructed as employees – at the organizational level, we demonstrate how this combination of welfare logics invalidates minority skills and competences brought to the labour market to the detriment of the recognition of difference contained in the otherwise popular business case of diversity management, which dominates the international diversity literature (Bendick, Egan, & Lanier, 2010; Dobbin et al., 2011; Kalev et al., 2006; Noon, 2007; Oswick & Noon, 2014; Zanonì et al., 2010). Thus, although the critique of the business case argument has raised important awareness about the fact that diversity management is never neutral and that there is always a pre-imposed hierarchical relationship between races, ethnicities, sexes, sexual orientations, etc., which makes a so-called meritocracy impossible, it seems that the critical stand has also missed out on what we can learn from the business case argument about recognition of difference.

As such, a central dilemma addressed in this article is the trade-off between recognition and redistribution, so eloquently discussed by the American author Nancy Fraser (e.g. Fraser, 1998; Fraser & Honneth, 2003). By drawing on Fraser, we uncover how diversity is a matter of balancing redistribution with recognition. Here, we diagnose the current maladies of diversity in a Danish context to be a matter of redistribution without (or even at the cost of) recognition, which is equally as devastating as recognition without redistribution (which is at the centre of Fraser's analyses in the North American context). Recognition of difference and hence social justice by means of both redistribution and recognition introduces the omission of critical diversity scholars predominantly framing difference as a matter of recognition (and status), while not paying sufficient attention to how to develop adequate means to rectify matters of redistribution and class (e.g. Acker, 2006; Kalev, 2009; Kalev et al., 2006). By analysing data of diversity and its management in a Danish organization within a theoretical framework combining social theory on (Danish) welfare logics and Fraser's conceptualization of social justice as a matter of recognition and redistribution, we are able to contribute to critical diversity literature in two respects: 1) by showing how certain logics of the welfare state (that have otherwise been highly praised in e.g. the North American context) limit the possibility for diversity and equality in a Danish workforce, and 2) by re-inscribing diversity management rationales (drawing on business case arguments) into the critical organizational commitment to social justice (drawing on a moral critical rationale).

To reach these contributions, the article is structured as follows. First we discuss the historical, cultural encounter between the North American diversity management concept, with its neo-liberal values of individualism and voluntarism, and the Danish welfare model, with its values of equality and solidarity. To create a better understanding of this complex relationship, we place it in the context of Fraser's work (1998) (Fraser & Honneth, 2003), showing how social justice can be pursued through both recognition and redistribution. Drawing on 94 employee stories on difference from "Fastfood" – a Danish workplace renowned for its diversity work – we then empirically analyse how redistributive welfare practices are practised in the organization at the cost of recognition. We use this finding to explain the lack of progress and the continued low standing of minorities in Danish organizations. We conclude by suggesting how organizations, through norm-critical methods, can reintroduce difference in a different – and less categorical – way compared to the traditional business case logic, in order to come closer to the delicate balance of recognition

and redistribution. In this way, we integrate arguments of 1) the business case's focus on difference, 2) the welfare state logics of equality and solidarity, and 3) a norm-critical practice that constantly challenges the categorical approach to the first two principles.

2. Diversity and its management in a Danish context

It is generally acknowledged that ethnic-minority employees are excluded or marginalized as low-skilled labour in the workplace (e.g. Acker, 2006; Ortlieb & Sieben, 2014; Qin et al., 2014; Zanonì, Janssens, Benschop & Nkomo, 2010). The traditional way to explain this exclusion and marginalization departs from the human resource management literature and employs the rationale of competitive advantage and human resource utilization to enhance organizational productivity and profitability through valuing difference as a way to redress this marginalization. This view is recognized as the *business case* for diversity (Herring & Henderson, 2012; Kalev, 2009; Noon, 2007; Oswick & Noon, 2014; Thomas & Ely, 1996). The business case is based on the idea that a diverse workforce can be a valuable asset for organizations if correctly managed, presenting diversity management as a way to value the unique competences of a diverse workforce and to create a win-win situation for employer and employees (Thomas & Ely, 1996; Zanonì, 2011). This has however been heavily criticized by a body of literature that aims to uncover power dynamics by illustrating how diversity management as a managerial practice functions as a form of managerial control, with majority employees setting the standard up against which minority employees are measured (Boogaard and Roggeband, 2010; Ghorashi & Sabelis, 2013; Kalev et al., 2006; Muhr & Salem, 2013; Ortlieb & Sieben, 2014; Schwabenland & Tomlinson, 2015; Zanonì & Janssens, 2015). The critical line of diversity literature has in particular focused on deconstructing and de-essentializing the notion of diversity to demonstrate how demographic categories and identities are to be seen not as static and fixed, but as social constructs under constant redefinition, influenced by competing discourses and existing structures of power, and varying according to the national/societal setting (Holck et al., 2016; Kalev, 2009; Knoppers, Claringbould & Dortants, 2014; Lorbiecki & Jack, 2009; Zanonì & Janssens, 2004, 2015). Here, research centres on generalized societal discourses on immigration, with a focus on deconstructing the different elements of those discourses (e.g. Ahonen et al., 2013; Bendick et al., 2010; Boogaard & Roggeband, 2009; Holvino & Kamp, 2009; Muhr & Salem, 2013; Samaluk, 2014; Tomlinson & Schwabenland, 2010) and on empirically studying how minorities experience such discrimination (e.g. Al Ariss et al., 2013; Klarsfeld, Ng & Tatli, 2012; Ostendorp & Steyaert, 2009; Oswick & Noon, 2014; Siebers, 2009; Van Laer & Janssens, 2014).

To understand such underlying obstacles for social justice, critical scholars like Acker (2006) view the organization as a power-scape consisting of both formalized, explicit structures of equality (e.g. a formalized diversity policy and the predominant welfare logic of equality) and more informal, subtle substructures of inequality. Substructures of inequality are often tacitly practised in the ordinary life of organizations, in which e.g. "ethnified" assumptions about minority/majority are embedded and reproduced, and inequality is perpetuated (Acker, 2006). The argument is that despite officially supported equality policies, tacit and more subtle practices of discrimination overrule and make many of such formal policies obsolete (Dover et al., 2016; Kalev et al., 2006; Van Laer & Janssens, 2014).

By zooming in on practices accounted for in leaders' and employees' accounts of difference, we trace how welfare logics of equality and solidarity entwine with and disrupt diversity practices in a Danish organization that is officially renowned as

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