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Support for diversity practices in Norway: Depends on who you are and whom you have met

Gordana Abramovic*, Laura E. Mercer Traavik

Department of Leadership and Organisational Behaviour, BI Norwegian Business School, 0484 Oslo, Norway

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ABSTRACT

An increasingly diverse workforce is a reality for today's organisations in Norway, and a variety of human resource practices are being introduced in order to manage this diversity effectively. However, little is known about what leads to the successful implementation of these diversity practices. Thus, we need to find out more about what affects the willingness to implement that is held by those responsible for the process. In this study we examine how contact with minority groups, values, orientation, and individual differences relate to their perceptions and support for diversity practices. In a survey conducted with 385 Norwegian individuals employed in different organisations and business sectors across the country, we observed a relationship between positive contact experiences with individuals from immigrant backgrounds, diversity values, other-orientation, age, and gender on the extent to which the respondents were willing to support a diversity practice. Theoretical and practical implications and directions for future research are discussed.

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1. Introduction

One of the main strategic challenges for modern organisations is rooted in the changing demographics of the workforce and the subsequent need for effective diversity management (DM) (Chrobot-Mason & Aramovich, 2013; Mor Barak, 2015; Nishii & Mayer, 2009; Roberson, 2006; Sabharwal, 2014; Shen, Chanda, D'Netto, & Monga, 2009). Even though great strides have been made to include women and minorities in organisations, there continues to be widespread disparities between groups and discrimination across countries (Ely, Stone, & Ammerman, 2014; Huffman, Cohen, & Pearlman, 2010; Jansen, Otten, & van der Zee, 2015; Kalev, Dobbin, & Kelly, 2006). A significant challenge for human resource (HR) managers today is the implementation of HR diversity practices. These practices often aim to increase, sustain, or guarantee the variation among organisational members along defined dimensions (Olsen & Martins, 2012). At the same time, the practices need to stay in line with organisational goals. Successful implementation of diversity practices is a cornerstone to effective DM and leaders play a pivotal role (Chrobot-Mason & Aramovich, 2013), yet not all leaders are equally motivated to implement these practices.

What is known from both the diversity research and general HR management literature is that leaders and line managers (LM) are central in the implementation of practices and effective DM (cf. Kalev et al., 2006; Ng & Sears, 2012; Nishii & Mayer, 2009; Purcell & Hutchinson, 2007). Diversity research has identified that leaders' values (Ng & Sears, 2012), relationships (Nishii & Mayer, 2009), and managerial accountability (Kalev et al., 2006) are critical for the success of DM. From the HR literature, managers have been recognised as the gatekeepers of whether general HR practices are carried out or not (Purcell & Hutchinson, 2007) and findings suggest that intended practices are often not realised. Managers blocking the implementation of HR practices is often cited as the reason for the gap between planned and enacted practices. Reasons for the obstruction include lack of interest, time, training, and credibility, self-oriented behaviour, conflict of priorities, and overwork (Fenton-O'Creevy, 2001; Hall & Torrington, 1998; Harris, 2001; McGovern, Gratton, Hope-Hailey, Stiles, & Truss, 1997; Purcell & Hutchinson, 2007; Renwick, 2003; Whittaker & Marchington, 2003). Managers are more likely to facilitate implementation when they perceive that practices are in line with their own individual self-interests and values (Harris, 2001; Harrison, Kravitz, Mayer, Leslie, & Lev-Arey, 2006; Kuvaas & Dysvik, 2010; Purcell & Hutchinson, 2007). Managers are individuals

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* Corresponding author.
E-mail address: dr.gordana_abramovic@yahoo.com (G. Abramovic).

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with their own motivations, beliefs and preferences, and these individual characteristics might affect their willingness to implement a diversity practice.

In addition, personal experiences with different groups might also affect willingness to implement an HR diversity practice. For example, if a manager has infrequent or negative contact with the group targeted by the diversity practice, he/she might be less interested in implementing this practice. However, if he/she has positive contact with members of the target group, this could positively influence his/her support for the DM practice. Contact theory (Allport, 1954) postulates that under certain conditions (equal status, pursuit of common goals, and institutional support) contact between different social identity groups leads to reduced prejudice. Decades of research supports the claim that intergroup contact reduces prejudice, regardless of whether all the conditions of Allport's model are met (Pettigrew & Tropp, 2006). Most of this research has examined positive contact and only recently has the importance of negative contact, and its potentially deleterious effects on attitudes, been investigated (Barlow et al., 2012). Hence, positive and negative experiences with the out-group could differently influence a manager's willingness to implement a diversity practice directed towards these specific groups.

This study seeks to close the knowledge gap on the link between individual experiences and characteristics, and an individual's willingness to implement a HR diversity practice. Specifically, we draw on contact theory (Allport, 1954) and previous diversity and HR work on the centrality of individuals for the implementation of policies (LMs) (Kulik, 2014; McGovern et al., 1997; Purcell & Hutchinson, 2007; Shen et al., 2009). By examining these relationships, we aim to contribute to both theory development within DM and to the HR literature. Namely, we seek to extend contact theory and apply it to effective DM, while by investigating individual's willingness to support specific HR practices we aim to shift the focus towards the individual and the unique practice. We examine the importance of experiences with different others, diversity values, self/other-orientation, and one's own demographic characteristics for willingness to support HR diversity practices (Fig. 1). Given that LMs are individuals who are vital to the successful implementation of diversity practices, the question remains, how individual experiences and who the LMs are, affect their willingness to support the implementation of a diversity practice.

2. Theoretical background and hypotheses

The successful implementation of HR diversity practices requires active involvement and support from the individuals responsible for this implementation – the LMs. A number of factors can influence LMs' decisions regarding which, and how many, practices to use. This section reviews the diversity and HR literature to identify the relevant individual experiences and characteristics that may be particularly important for successful implementation of HR diversity practices. First, we argue that HR diversity practices are unique and different from other HR initiatives and require special attention. We then examine how intergroup contact theory can extend our understanding of effective DM. Lastly, individual characteristics that might affect the willingness of individuals to carry out a diversity practice are reviewed.

In organisational settings, workforce diversity may be defined as, "the division of the workforce into distinction categories that (a) have a perceived commonality within a given cultural or national context and (b) impact potentially harmful or beneficial employment outcomes such as job opportunities, treatment in the workplace, and promotion prospects – irrespective of job-related skills and qualifications" (Mor Barak, 2014, p. 136). Demographic characteristics, such as ethnicity, race, gender, and age (Olsen & Martins, 2012), have usually been the focus of diversity practices (cf. Kalev et al., 2006). Many of these practices place organisational members into group categories that mirror the social reality of intergroup interaction and/or influence it (Lumby, 2009). As Lumby (2009) emphasised, the practices often have the goal of increasing the degree of representation of these groups and/or achieving inclusive structures and culture.

While a large body of research has shed light on the gap between intended and implemented HR practices, these studies have focused on bundles of practices (Hall & Torrington, 1998; McGovern et al., 1997; Purcell & Hutchinson, 2007; Whittaker & Marchington, 2003). The variety among distinct types of practices has largely been neglected (e.g., Sanders, Dorenbosch, & de Reuver, 2008). What is unique about diversity practices is that they directly relate to an individual's membership in different demographic groups, which in turn can trigger his/her social identity (e.g., Tajfel, 1982). Diversity practices are complex, since they are designed to redress or attenuate historical forms of discrimination based on

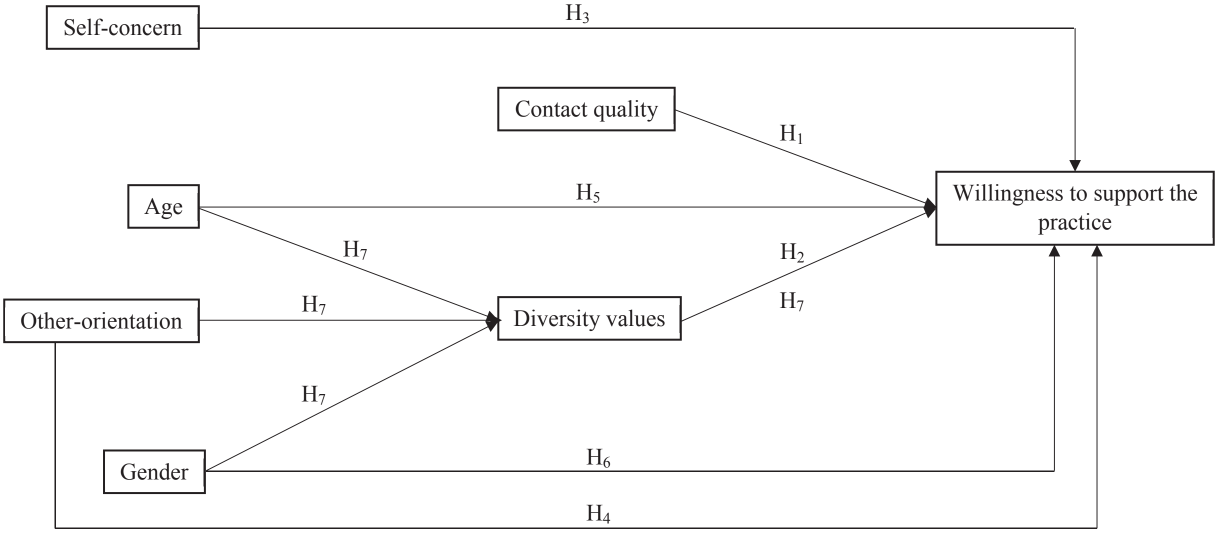

Fig. 1. Conceptual Model.

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