Ethnic identity positioning at work: Understanding professional career experiences

Carolin Ossenkop[a],*, Claartje J. Vinkenburg[a], Paul G.W. Jansen[a], Halleh Ghorashi[b]

[a] VU University Amsterdam, Faculty of Economics and Business Administration, Department of Management and Organisation, De Boelelaan 1105, 1081 HV Amsterdam, The Netherlands
[b] VU University Amsterdam, Faculty of Social Sciences, Department of Sociology, De Boelelaan 1105, 1081 HV Amsterdam, The Netherlands

A B S T R A C T

In our effort to uncover, understand, and make sense of career experiences of ethnic diverse employees in a professional service firm in the Netherlands, we unraveled ethnic identity construction through analyzing accounts of individual sensemaking, interaction, and institutional practices. The analysis of 26 semi-structured interviews of dominant and minority ethnic professionals shows how both dominant and minority ethnic identity construction is conflated with processes of "othering" in relation to the hegemonic norm. We illustrate and problematize the emergence of the normalization of othering by highlighting its potential consequences for individual career experiences. By opening up the discussion of identity matters in professionals' career experiences, we suggests means to move away from normalized processes of othering by making room for alterity.

© 2015 Elsevier Ltd. All rights reserved.

1. Introduction

. . . ABCD [the professional service firm] stays a conservative bastion of, in exaggerated terms, White men, um, therefore sometimes, diversity is hard to find, certainly in higher levels. (#17, dominant ethnic man)

The apparent White male dominance at higher levels in professional service firms stands in strong contrast to the increasingly diverse workforce of such firms. Observations such as the above fueled our interest in how diverse professionals experience their careers in a professional service firm in the Netherlands. When conducting semi-structured interviews with ethnic and gender diverse employees about their career experiences, the professionals' identities within the organizational context emerged as a pivotal theme guiding our understanding. The importance of ethnic identity (construction) at work in general, and in relation to professional career experiences in particular, resonates in Bell, Denton, and Nkomo's (1993) observation of the stress experienced of black professional women working in a mostly dominant ethnic and male environment, where "circumstances often dictate that, for women of color to be successful managers, they must adopt a new identity and abandon commitment to their old culture" (Bell et al., 1993, pp. 118–119).

Having to assimilate to the majority culture instead of "being able to bring one's entire set of identities to work" remains a key organizational marker of ethnic inequality (Janssens & Zanoni, 2014, p. 318).

Since we see a lack of ethnic diversity especially at higher organizational levels, we attempt to uncover, understand, and give meaning to the role of individual identities in diverse employees' career experiences within the same organizational context as a potential explanation for our observation. We follow Kenny and Briner's (2007) recommendations to study ethnicity by exploring the salience of an individual's ethnic identity through qualitative research and by focusing on career advancement specifically within a professional context. In addition, we respond to the call for including both minority ethnic professionals and dominant ethnic professionals when empirically studying differential outcomes and career experiences between these groups in the organizational context (Thomas and Alderfer, 1989; Zanoni, Janssens, Benschop, & Nkomo, 2010). As such, by joining a growing tradition of qualitative approaches to the study of careers and minority ethnics (e.g., Fearfull and Kamenou, 2006; Johnston & Kyriacou, 2011; Kenny & Briner, 2010; Kirton, 2009), this study's main contribution lies in the comparison between the minority ethnics' and dominant ethnics' career experiences within the same firm. For our inductive analysis we were guided toward illuminating how processes of othering are normalized through identity construction at work, using Jenkins' framework of identity construction in relation to the individual, the interaction, and the institutional order as a sensitizing concept

* Corresponding author.
  E-mail address: C.Ossenkop@vu.nl (C. Ossenkop).

(Jenkins, 2004,2008). From a non-positivistic and non-essentialist understanding of diversity and identity, we explore how context-specific processes "and the resulting understandings both reflect unequal power relations within a given context and contribute to maintaining, resisting, and/or transforming them" (Zanoni et al., 2010, p. 10), thus illustrating resulting consequences in terms of career experiences. Our explicit focus on the individual level of experience precludes attention to shared perceptions of the organizational culture (Schneider, Erhart, & Macey, 2013) or the diversity climate (Kossek & Zonia, 1993; Schneider & Reichers, 1983). In order to meaningfully study the degree to which an organizational climate is generally perceived as inclusive (Nishii & Rich, 2014), Kenny and Briner (2007) suggest to seek out samples that include higher numbers of minority ethnic employees. While ours is not a large sample, it gives voice to individual career experiences and sensemaking of ethnic identity, and adds a different perspective on how to create a more inclusive organizational culture, positively stimulating career experiences and advancement.

1.1. Careers in professional service firms

Professional service firms, such as law firms, management consulting firms, and financial service providers, are characterized by high knowledge intensity and a professionalized workforce (Von Nordenflycht, 2010). Described as following up-or-out career systems, professional service firms often apply specific, linear promotion processes according to strict performance measurements based on objective criteria and time frames (Kumra & Vinnicombe, 2008) including strong path-dependencies (Martell, Emrich, & Robison-Cox, 2012; Vinkenburg & Weber, 2012). In order to sustain the firm's partnership structure, those not advancing to the next career level according to the given parameters are dismissed (Greenwood, Li, Prakash, & Deephouse, 2005; Kumra & Vinnicombe, 2008; Morris & Pinnington, 1998). Since being highly skilled and knowledgeable is considered a precondition for employees in professional service firms (Greenwood et al., 2005), clearly more than only occupational proficiency is needed to move up rather than out (Gilson & Mnookin, 1985). Subjective criteria held by decision makers at higher organizational levels seem to tip the scale (Gilson & Mnookin, 1985) when it comes to promotion decisions. In addition, specific attributes of diversity, such as ethnic background and/or gender, have been suggested to play a role in career advancement (see for specific examples in professional service firms Fearfull and Kamenou, 2006; Kumra & Vinnicombe, 2008; Spurr & Sueyoshi, 1994). Ethnicity, for instance, has been associated with inequalities in hiring decisions, performance ratings, job evaluations, opportunities for promotion, and (dis)advantages in salary (e.g., Bielby, 2012; Greenhaus, Parasuraman, & Wormley, 1990; James, 2000; Maume, 2012; Ng, Eby, Sorensen, & Feldman, 2005; Parks-Yancy, 2006; Rivera, 2012) in favor of dominant ethnics compared to minority ethnics in managerial and professional careers.

Thus, even though professional service firms ostensibly seem to put an objective and performance-oriented career system into effect, these merit-based reward and promotion systems paradoxically seem to maintain, if not increase demographic differences in career progress in favor of the dominant ethnic male group (Castilla, 2008; Castilla & Benard, 2010).

1.2. Diversity

Diversity can either be defined in terms of the compositional approach or in terms of the relational approach (Guillaume, Brodbeck, & Riketta, 2011). The compositional approach focuses on the mere "*distribution of differences among the members of a unit with respect to a common attribute, X*, such as tenure, ethnicity, conscientiousness, task attitude, or pay. Diversity is a unit-level, compositional construct" (Harrison & Klein, 2007, p. 1200, original emphasis), whereas the relational approach considers " the *extent* to which an individual's demographic, or idiosyncratic attributes are shared by others in the unit" (Guillaume et al., 2011, p. 2, emphasis added by first author). As a function of an individual's relative level of dissimilarity in the unit in terms of a particular common attribute, diversity may affect work-related behavior, attitudes, processes, and outcomes for individuals differently, depending on their extent of similarity with the others in the unit (Guillaume et al., 2011). Differences due to demographic or idiosyncratic diversity become meaningful by their embeddedness in social or institutional structures, which can lead to various forms of inequality between individuals (DiTomaso, Post, & Parks-Yancy, 2007). Within this study, we focus on ethnicity as the pivotal demographic attribute. We embrace the relational approach to diversity, since we are interested in the individual experience of ethnic identity construction within the organization as the focal unit.

Ethnicity has been defined as an aspect of the social relationship between groups whose members consider themselves as being culturally distinctive from other groups (Eriksen, 2002). Kenny and Briner use the term ethnicity to "denote group differences based on shared ancestry, traditions and categorizations by those within and external to the group" (2007, p. 439). We therefore understand ethnic diversity in terms of relative dissimilarities between individuals within one unit due to assigned or acclaimed group membership based on assumed similarities in culture, ancestry, traditions, and categorizations.

Located in the specific context of the Netherlands, we follow the official definition of the Central Bureau of Statistics in the Netherlands with respect to ethnic group membership (CBS, 2012)[1] contrasting "dominant ethnics" (i.e., ethnic Dutch) to "minority ethnics" (i.e., non-western minority ethnic). Acknowledging that "dominant" and "minority" are not exact antonyms, we nevertheless specifically choose to use this terminology to highlight the complex relationships and dependencies between ethnic groups, which do not necessarily reflect numerical representations of group members in organizations (e.g., DiTomaso et al., 2007). We use the term "ethnic" both as a noun and as an adjective, always preceded by the description of either dominant or minority, because this "conveys that ethnicity is something we all possess" (Kenny & Briner, 2007, p. 439).

1.3. Identity

Identity, or the understanding of who we are, is "at least in principle always negotiable, [and] identity is not fixed" (Jenkins, 2004, p. 5). Thus, identity can be viewed as "a dynamic process: a changing view of the self and the other that constantly acquires

---

[1] The Central Bureau of Statistics in the Netherlands states the following standard definition (1999) of a member of the ethnic minority in the Netherlands: "According to the new definition, a person is considered a member of the ethnic minority group ("allochtoon"), if at least one parent is born abroad [meaning, outside of the Netherlands, added by first author] ". In consequence, a person whose parents were both born in the Netherlands is considered an "ethnic Dutch" ("autochtoon"). In addition, the general group of ethnic minorities in the Netherlands is further specified in western and non-western ethnic minorities, according to the following definition: "All European countries (except for Turkey), North America, Oceania, Japan, and Indonesia (including the former Dutch-Indies) are considered western countries of origin. Non-western countries of origin are Turkey and all African countries, Latin America, and Asia (excluding Japan and Indonesia). (. . .) If a group is very similar to the Dutch population in socio-economic or in cultural terms, it is considered to be one of the western ethnic minority groups)." (website CBS, retrieved on 14th of November 2012: http://www.cbs.nl/NR/rdonlyres/26785779-AAFE-4B39-AD07-59F34DCD44C8/0/index1119.pdf).