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Alternative diversity management: Organizational practices fostering ethnic equality at work



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Abstract Taking a critical, performative stance, this study aims to advance our understanding of diversity management enhancing ethnic equality at work. Relying on a multiple-case study, we inductively identify organizational practices that foster the valuing of multiple competencies and the ability to express multiple identities, two key organizational markers of ethnic equality advanced in the gender and diversity literature. Our analysis indicates that ethnic equality is fostered by practices that broaden dominant norms on competencies and cultural identities, and avoid reducing ethnic minority employees to mere representatives of a stigmatized social group. In contrast to ‘classical’ diversity management practices which focus on individuals’ cognitive biases toward out-group members, these practices redefine what is ‘standard’ in the employment relationship, hereby structurally countering ethnic inequality within organizational boundaries.
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Introduction

Despite two decades of research documenting and theorizing power *inequality* between the majority and historically underrepresented groups in organizations (Linnehan & Konrad, 1999; Prasad, Pringle, & Konrad, 2006), our current knowledge on how organizations can actually achieve power *equality* remains poor. The diversity management (DM) practices advanced in the scientific and managerial literature – e.g. formalized human resource management (HRM) procedures, diversity training, networking and mentoring – have

not only been found largely ineffective in fostering equality (Kalev, Dobbin, & Kelly, 2006; Kulik & Roberson, 2008) but even counterproductive to the extent that they reinforce stereotypes and exacerbate the majority’s hostility toward minorities (Bond & Pyle, 1998; Linnehan & Konrad, 1999).

Starting from the social psychological assumption that inequality primarily originates in the negative in-group/out-group dynamics resulting from individuals’ biased cognitive processes (Byrne, 1971; Tajfel & Turner, 1986), classical DM practices aim to correct majority individuals’ stereotyping and prejudices (e.g. diversity training), to limit the discretion of biased decision makers regarding allocation and rewarding decisions (e.g. formalization of HRM procedures), and to compensate for majority’s exclusion of minorities due to their bias (e.g. networking and mentoring programs). Although social psychology acknowledges that contextual factors play a key role in triggering or diminishing negative in-group/out-group dynamics (Allport, 1954; Pettigrew &

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Tropp, 2006), these practices do not address them. Rather, they directly address cognition, leaving organizational structures and routines which reproduce inequalities and normalize the privileges of the dominant group (e.g. white and male employees) unchanged (Jones & Stablein, 2006; Kalev et al., 2006; Prasad, 2006; Zanoni, Janssens, Benschop, & Nkomo, 2010).

In this study, we seek to envision alternative DM practices which more effectively foster ethnic equality (cf. Holvino & Kamp, 2009; Litvin, 2006). To do so, we inductively identify practices – formalized organizational system, process, or practice developed and implemented for the purpose of effectively managing a diverse workforce (Yang & Konrad, 2011) – that achieve two key organizational markers of ethnic equality derived from the gender and diversity literature: (1) the valuing of multiple knowledge, skills and competencies of a diverse personnel (rather than valuing solely those of the majority) (Acker, 1990; Zanoni & Janssens, 2004; Zanoni & Janssens, 2007) and (2) the possibility for all employees to bring their entire set of identities to work (rather than having to assimilate to the majority culture) (Cox, 1991, 1993; Linnehan & Konrad, 1999). These markers point to structural contextual characteristics of organizations. They reflect the two main identity axes along which inter-ethnic power relations occur in organizations: class – i.e. ethnic minority employees' subordinate position in the employment relation – and ethnicity – i.e. their ethnic/cultural/religious/linguistic subordinate position vis-à-vis the ethnic majority. By including both identity axes, we avoid reducing ethnic minority workers a priori to their particular cultural background, language and religion (Proudford & Nkomo, 2006).

Searching for alternative DM, this study seeks to contribute to the critically oriented diversity literature. While drawing on different critical theories (e.g. post-structuralism, Marxist theories, postcolonial theory, feminist perspectives), this literature shares at its core an understanding of diversity as socially (re)produced in ongoing, context-specific organizational processes which both reflect and reproduce structural power relations (Prasad et al., 2006; Zanoni et al., 2010). Power is conceptualized as a relation emerging from specific material and/or ideological structures, rather than as being located in individual cognition. Accordingly, these theories provide lenses that are suitable to highlight how organizational practices reinforce inequality along identity lines or, conversely, challenge structural elements of inequality.

In undertaking this search for alternative DM, we are aware of the difficulties and contradictions inherent to building 'critical' diversity theory from practices in capitalist organizations (cf. Foldy, 2002; Fournier & Grey, 2000). We neither deny nor champion the inherently instrumental nature of management. Rather, we take notice of it and opt to temporarily bracket our fundamental critique to engage with such practices (cf. Anthony, 1998) and gain an understanding of how organizations can achieve more equality between the majority and minorities, despite (and even, possibly, by virtue of) their capitalistic nature. We follow Pringle, Konrad, and Prasad's (2006) call for pushing critical approaches beyond the mere examination and exposition of situations of dominance and repression, melding them into the pragmatics of the daily management of diversity. So, we refuse to leave DM to non-critical, functionalistic research paradigms

which aim to enhance performance instead of challenging inequalities (cf. Foldy, 2002). At the same time, we acknowledge the difficulties of the task at hand and do not evade critically self-reflecting on the (im)possibilities of equality-fostering DM practices in capitalist organizations.

Empirically, we present in depth one organization – a call center – that stood out in a larger multiple-case study of ten organizations for the equality it had achieved between ethnic majority and minority employees along the two above-mentioned markers. We complement our case analysis by comparing the practices of this organization with those implemented in the other nine, less equal organizations. Our findings suggest that organizations can enhance ethnic equality by deploying their power to enforce practices that redefine the employment relationship along broadened norms and avoid reducing ethnic minority employees to mere representatives of a stigmatized social group. Capitalist organizations are not necessarily sites maintaining ethnic inequality. By enforcing alternative structures, they can avoid reproducing the ethnic inequality institutionalized in broader society within their own boundaries, taking up a pioneering role in advancing ethnic equality.

Theoretical background

'Classical' diversity management practices

Whereas the critical diversity literature has pointed to structural organizational characteristics as the main reason for the enduring disadvantages of ethnic minorities at the workplace, the practices commonly advanced in the DM literature focus on individuals' cognition and related discriminatory behavior (Kalev et al., 2006). We review here the main DM practices and their shortcomings as found in empirical studies.

One of the main diversity practices is formalized HRM procedures. Here, the argument is that objective and pre-specified criteria in selection, promotion, lay-off decisions (Konrad & Linnehan, 1995; Reskin, 2003), performance appraisal and pay structures (Elvira & Graham, 2002) will restrict ethnic majority decision makers' discretion and prevent cognitive biases to shape allocation and rewarding decisions, reducing discrimination. While widespread, this diversity practice is not without discussion. Scholars have pointed to its limited impact because decisions makers' discretion is not totally removed (Linnehan & Konrad, 1999) and, more importantly, because HRM systems continue to be culturally biased, valuing the skills and the qualities of the ethnic majority (Acker, 1990; Bond & Pyle, 1998). This latter critique is in line with our starting argument that a focus on individuals' cognition does not adequately address power differentials and equality between social identity groups.

A second widespread practice is training. Based on the social psychological insight that information may reduce bias (Fiske, 1998), training modules familiarize employees with anti-discrimination law, suggest behavioral changes, and increase cultural awareness and cross-cultural communication (Pendry, Driscoll, & Field, 2007). However, some studies indicate that information about out-group members' culture actually reinforces group stereotypes and prejudices (Ellis & Sonnenfeld, 1994; Rynes & Rosen, 1995) does not change

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