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Juggling difference and sameness: Rethinking strategies for diversity in organizations

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Summary In this era of omnipresent diversity, we face paradoxical outcomes from practices, policies and the management of diversity in organizations. On the one hand, diversity is supposed to be adopted in terms of social justice and inclusiveness: embracing all talent and reaching out to diverse groups that traditionally were not part of the core of organizations. On the other hand, broad societal discourses of otherness are emerging, which severely limit chances for the inclusion of 'others'. We propose to re-theorize and contextualize these phenomena; we aim to discuss alternative approaches of dealing with diversity by connecting strategic essentialism, contiguity, and space/time relations to exemplify the often hidden workings of the power dimensions involved.

Managing diversity: essentializing sameness and difference

Towards the end of the previous century the issue of diversity in organizations gained a prominent place in both academic and societal debates. Yet, management of diversity appears to be "a Herculean task, requiring much more than managerial enthusiasm, optimism, and good intentions" (Prasad & Mills, 1997, p. 5). The taken for granted privilege of dominant groups (mostly white and male) in organizations makes it almost impossible to value the contribution of women and ethnic minorities (due Billing & Sundin, 2006; Prasad & Mills, 1997), rendering them 'space invaders' in the organizational realm (Puwar, 2004) and excluding them from top positions (Essed, 2002). This raises the question of whether or not diversity (management) programmes are merely concealing enduring patterns of exclusion (Prasad & Mills, 1997, pp. 14–15) on the individual level as well as on an institutional or a managerial one. A joint rise in inclusive diversity programmes in organizations and a societal discourse of excluding 'others' (that cannot help but influence work contexts), implies that interest in and scepticism of diversity programmes may be growing at a similar pace. Within the discussions over the past decades concerning diversity issues in organizations (Essed, 2002; Liff & Wajcman, 1996; Zanoni, 2011; Zanoni & Janssens, 2003), we

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particularly note a struggle in relation to sameness and difference. Holvino and Kamp (2009, p. 398) refer to this struggle as the 'sameness—difference' dilemma, in which diversity is either assimilated or essentialized. Both render diversity invisible but not 'dealt with'. This makes diversity a risk instead of an option, a hidden and ongoing force of exclusion that could emerge in unintended guises and at unexpected times.

Ely and Thomas (2001) presented three paradigms in dealing with diversity in organizations. The first focuses on the ways in which discrimination as the source of exclusion in organizations needs to be tackled. Yet, the solution provided was to assimilate the difference into sameness by introducing 'colour blind policies' (2001, p. 247). The second paradigm discussed by these authors celebrates diversity to seek access to a more diverse clientele and customers. Within this paradigm difference is included, yet somewhat marginalized within organizations as it solely serves the purpose of promotion to a diverse group of clientele or customers. An example of this is ethnic marketing, which uses people of colour to promote products. Both paradigms are essentialist in their approach; they either essentialize sameness (first paradigm) or difference (second paradigm). The third paradigm, which is the most promising, stresses the need for diversity as a process, as 'ongoing learning' in order to overcome or deal with exclusion. This process includes contextual notions such as: the historical development of diversity, organizational culture as symbolically representing diversity (or the lack thereof), and the ongoing and dialectic relationships between individual experiences and intentions, group level translation of these and the organizational—institutional outcomes of diversity and diversity management in everyday practices.

Essentialism has a reifying quality to it. Identity components (such as gender, ethnicity, and class) are necessarily seen as static, fixed, timeless, and barely changeable. This position has influenced the debates on diversity from which we draw when looking at the current development of diversity. Essentialism does not allow for contextual and situational ways, in which individual members of groups shape and re-shape their (ethnic, cultural, gender) identity through interactions with other individuals over time. It also renders invisible the need for rethinking concepts of difference vis-à-vis current practices of cooperation, experimentation, and change inside and outside organizations. Ultimately, this leads to a lack of focus on the possibility of hybrid positioning in organizations, by which individual members always combine elements from various available (among others cultural and ethnic) resources and repertoires, either strategically (cf. Koot, 1997), or in order to structurally and politically develop 'the organization as a better place for all its members' (cf. Cox, 1993). The latter refers to the definition of diversity in organizations, in which ethnicity, gender, class background, and other identity issues are related to what presents itself as endlessly unfolding processes of inclusion and exclusion that are forever infused with power and politics (Acker, 2006) and that are hard to grasp or to measure. These processes are tricky in the sense that they are usually felt or sensed rather than collectively observable or assessable. We therefore propose to focus on what we may call a balancing act between sameness and difference in striving for inclusion in organizations. With this we may develop an approach to diversity that goes beyond essentialism and that pays tribute to process (i.e. ongoing change) and power relations. We contend that it is through the situative use of sameness and difference that human interaction in and beyond organizations can be understood. With this dynamic balance as our point of departure, we build our argument. First we present what we consider limitations of current diversity practices; then we address power issues surrounding these practices; and finally, we propose alternative ways to juggle diversity in organizations.

Managing diversity backfires

With the publication of the Workforce 2000 Report in 1987, which showed the growing heterogeneous mix of the future labour market, the necessity to include others in organizations became more salient, both for policy makers and in organizations (Zanoni, Janssens, Benschop, & Nkomo, 2010). The concept of diversity[1] developed as an overarching perspective to combine the problems of ethnicity, gender, and other levels of exclusion. Implied here was the assumption that organizations would (have to) change when others entered. The question is not if this is so, but when and especially how change will come about. At the time, the concern seemed to be more with explaining the advantages and the necessity of 'diversity' than with the organizational requirements. Either organizations would change more or less automatically (Loden & Rosener, 1991, pp. 24—27), or diversity would become a managerial responsibility (Thomas, 1991). Metaphors such as the 'tossed salad' (Loden & Rosener, 1991) or the 'blooming tree with deep (different) roots' (Thomas, 1991) were used to promote the idea that the organization could develop into a 'better place for all of its members' (Cox, 1993).

However, as it turned out in the early 1990s, the interest in diversity only emerged when economic benefits explicitly became part of the argument; this also changed the discourse of diversity into managing diversity, including the implication that the mere presence of 'others' would require managerial intervention (Cox, 1993; Thomas, 1991). The economic benefit argument also stressed the idea of diversity producing 'added value' via the inclusion of as many cultural differences as possible. As argued elsewhere (Sabelis, 1996), the culturalist view indeed allows for the empowerment of otherness, but only if there is a direct, preferably measurable benefit for the organization. In turn, this points to a collective attitude in which the willingness for organizational change is not the starting point for diversity programmes. Indeed, as Liff and Wajcman (1996) argued, diversity from this angle develops into a business case. This does not serve to sensitize organizational members to the goals of adopting diversity, i.e. promoting and developing equality in organizations. In fact, including the cultural other from an economic

[1] We explicitly address the Dutch/West European situation here. In the Netherlands, diversity grew in the 1980s out of the 'anti'-sexism/racism action groups, largely coming forth from the women's movement. One of the early exponents of this movement (and an early active member of Kantharos) was Philomena Essed who already in 1984 wrote her dissertation on racism drawing parallels to other forms of exclusion (see Essed, 1991).