Theories of Diversity within Organisation Studies: Debates and Future Trajectories

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Theories of Diversity within Organisation Studies: Debates and Future Trajectories

Theories on diversity and diversity management within the field of Organisation Studies started to develop in the 80s, mainly under the influence of managerial reports pointing towards the increasing diversity of the future workforce. The purpose of this paper was to 1) review the existing studies on diversity identifying their main purposes, 2) identify the current debates in the field, and 3) point towards possible future directions.

Studies on diversity seem to have a two-fold purpose. A first purpose is to identify discriminatory practices in the workplace. Several studies have examined the working experiences of minority groups, inducing our attention to phenomena such as the glass-ceiling effect (e.g. Cox & Nkomo, 1990; Wirth, 2001), wage differences (e.g. Ashraf, 1996; Blau & Beller, 1988), segregation (e.g. Anker, 1998; Ibarra, 1995). A second purpose is to examine the effects of diversity on work-related outcomes. For instance, studies (Milliken & Martins, 1996) have examined the relationship between value diversity and conflict, or between cognitive heterogeneity and problem-solving capabilities. The authors discussed these two strands of studies by summarising their main findings and conclusions.

Wanting to achieve one (or both) of the two purposes, the domain has mainly focused on the consequences of diversity and seems to have neglected theoretical reflections on the notions of 'diversity,' 'difference,' or the 'other.' This need for theorising has been indicated by well-known scholars in the field (e.g. Cox, 1995; Nkomo, 1995; 2000; Nkomo & Cox, 1996), concerned about the continuation of the diversity domain. Within these current debates, the authors identified mainly four issues: a narrow or broad definition of diversity, a stable or dynamic conception of identity, the role of power, and the importance of the socio-historical context. With the discussion of these four issues, the authors indicated the implicit 'theoretical' choices prioritising the concept of 'identity', turning the issues of diversity into a managing of individuals and 'their' identities. They concluded by pointing towards possible future directions of theorising and researching diversity.

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DIVERSITY WITHIN ORGANISATION STUDIES

Within the field of Organisation Studies, diversity is a recent domain of research. The interest in diversity began mainly in the United States, which has given the diversity literature within Organisation Studies a decidedly American tint. More specific, it were managerial reports on the demographic developments in the United States which have led to an emphasis on diversity. At the end of the 1980s, a report entitled *Workforce 2000* (Johnston & Parker, 1987) appeared in the United States, in which it was predicted that over the next ten years traditional minority groups such as women and people of color would form a bigger part of the labor force than the existing majority of white men. This demographic projection of the labor force for the year 2000 caused a minor shockwave in the U.S., receiving a good deal of attention in the popular press. However, demographic developments are not the only factors stimulating the awareness and recognition of diversity in Organisation Studies. To meet the demands of quality, innovation and internationalization, organisations are looking for new ways of organizing. A classical, functional organisation can no longer create the variation necessary for solving complex problems which leads to the installation of project teams, matrix structure, cross-functional teams and other new forms. They are all necessary forms of collaboration in which people from different departments and levels in the hierarchy work together. In such a process of organizing, employees are automatically confronted with fellow workers who have different educational levels, experience, functions or values. In addition, organisations are increasingly coming to recognise the value of a heterogeneous staff when they wish to develop new products and win new markets.

In general, the diversity literature focuses on and promotes above all the advantages of diversity and calls for a management that not only shows a passive tolerance for diversity, but

is prepared *and* capable of actively supporting and stimulating the increasing heterogeneity. The challenge for an organisation is to create the conditions in which every employee has the opportunity to express all the relevant aspects of herself or himself. Or as Thomas (1991) puts it: the goal is one of "tapping fully the human resource potential of every member of the workforce". Examining the different studies on diversity more in-depth, one can distinguish between two types of research.

One group of researchers seems to study diversity from a *moral-ethical* perspective. They focus on the social inequity in organisations and seek after a more socially just situation in which the available functions and positions are spread more evenly over the different groups. Ely (1995, p. 164) formulates this attention to diversity as an emancipatory goal: "emancipatory both in the traditional sense of freeing people from oppression and in the sense of freeing people to explore themselves". The purpose of this strand of research seems to identify discriminatory practices in the workplace. For instance, several studies have examined the working experiences of minority groups, inducing our attention to phenomena such as the glass-ceiling effect (e.g. Cox & Nkomo, 1990; Wirth, 2001), wage differences (e.g. Ashraf, 1996; Blau & Beller, 1988), segregation (e.g. Anker, 1998; Ibarra, 1995).

A second group of researchers seem to study diversity from an organizational and economical perspective. They focus mainly on the effects of diversity on work-related outcomes and give arguments why organizations should focus on diversity. For instance, studies (for a review see Milliken & Martins, 1996) have examined the relationship between value diversity and conflict, or between cognitive heterogeneity and problem-solving capabilities. The arguments in favor that are being developed relate to the costs companies risk if their policy pays too little attention to the diversity. A high turnover, lower job

satisfaction, frustration and inter-group conflicts are just a few of the negative results of a failure to deal with heterogeneity (Cox, 1991). Positive arguments, on the other hand, include the ability to attract people, creativity and quality, and more system flexibility (Cox, 1991)

In this paper, we shall first examine the two types of studies on diversity more in-depth. We focus on two main issues: the categorisation of diversity and the effects of diversity. We then move to the current critical debates within diversity literature. The domain seems to be in a struggle and several well-known scholars concerned about the future direction of the diversity domain (e.g. Cox, 1995; Nkomo, 1995; 2000; Nkomo & Cox, 1996) are formulating critical observations and self-reflections. Examining these critical debates, we identified mainly four issues: a narrow or broad definition of diversity, a stable or dynamic conception of identity, the role of power, and the importance of the socio-historical context. To conclude, we discuss the consequences of these four critical debates for future research on diversity.

RESEARCH ON DIVERSITY:

IN SEARCH OF CATEGORIES AND EFFECTS

Further reading of the diversity literature reveals a great deal of attention paid to defining the term 'diversity'. In one of the first articles in the diversity literature, diversity is described as "people with different ethnic backgrounds, nationalities, age, religion and social class" (Carter, Kepner, Shaw & Woodson, 1982, p. 49). Over the years, diversity has referred practically to all characteristics, and new characteristics have been added, such as gender, economic class, marital status, sexual orientation, education level, disability and so on. In searching for a definition of 'diversity', we can identify a rather large number of different

categories of difference. We would argue that this variety is already a first indication that the reality of diversity cannot easily be categorised. Particularly striking in this variation in categories is the difference between authors who study diversity from a moral-ethical perspective dimension, and authors who are interested in the effect of diversity on organisations from a more economical perspective.

Diversity from a moral-ethical perspective

Within this type of research, the following three main sorts of categorisation can be identified: primary and secondary characteristics, variable and invariable characteristics, and visible and invisible characteristics. The distinction between the primary and secondary characteristics (Daft, 1994) refers to the central versus the acquired elements that can influence the way people perceive themselves and their environment. The *primary* dimensions include gender, age, ethnicity, sexual orientation, race and physical condition, while education, religion, geographical origin, income, marital status and profession fall under the *secondary* dimensions.

A second categorisation makes a distinction on the basis of the relative variability of the sources of diversity. Relatively *invariable* characteristics are race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, nationality and socio-economic background. Age, function, education, marital status and physical condition are categorised as *variable* types of diversity.

Finally, there is the categorisation according to visible and invisible or observable and nonobservable characteristics (Cox, 1993; Milliken & Martins, 1996). Here the dimensions of race, ethnicity, gender and age are considered *visible* sources of diversity, and education, function, experience in the organisation and socio-economic class are categorised as

invisible. Diversity in this last category refers to the underlying norms and values common to a certain group of people.

Researchers within this type of diversity studies are very concerned about defining and categorising diversity because of the danger and problems of overlaps between the different categories. For instance, the primary dimension relates to the relatively invariable dimension but is not identical with it. Likewise, the less visible differences in values and norms are often very similar to the visible differences such as ethnicity and age, and yet this correspondence is not absolute. The different categories are not mutually exclusive and this leads to the danger of possible misinterpretations on the effects of diversity. Attention to this problem of interpretation in understandable in the light of these authors' concern for equal representation and the representation of certain groups in organisations.

Diversity from an organizational, economical perspective

Other types of categorisation are found in research taking a more organizational and economical perspective. An example drawn from the consultancy world of 'diversity management' involves categorisation according to cultural, functional and historical dimensions (Pollar & Gonzalez, 1994). Examples of *cultural* differences include religion, age, ethnicity and language ability. *Functional* differences refer to the differences in the way we learn, think, process information and deal with authority. *Historical* differences refer to family make-up, political opinions and inter-group relationships. In contrast to diversity research from a moral-ethical perspective, the category of functional differences is added and explicitly refers to differences that relate directly to the organisational context. This emphasis on functional differences is worked out in greater detail in the academic literature.

An often cited categorisation of diversity is the following five clusters (McGrath, Berdahl & Arrow, 1995):

1. demographic characteristics such as age, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, physical status, religion and education

2. task-related knowledge, skills and capacities

3. values, views and attitudes

4. personality, and cognitive and attitudinal styles

5. status in the organisation such as one's hierarchical position, professional domain, departmental affiliation and seniority.

The emphasis on functional characteristics can be further found in the distinction between representative and functional categories (see Northcraft, Polzer, Neale & Kramer, 1995). Scholars adopting the economical perspective argue that the attention given to representative diversity such as demographic characteristics is mainly stimulated from a juridical standpoint such as laws promoting positive discrimination. This juridical argumentation produces a balanced representation of diverse groups among an organisation's workers but from an organisational perspective this type of diversity is less effective for achieving the organisation's objectives. More attention is given to differences in knowledge, values and personality. From this perspective, further categorisation entails identifying additional functional types of diversity such as access to networks and access to physical sources such as support through staff services, technology and sponsoring.

Besides a focus on functional differences, these researchers seem to be very concerned with the observability and measurability of the sources of differences. They assert, for

instance, that many demographic characteristics are immediately observable, affording a reasonably accurate estimate of someone's age, gender, ethnicity or background. This can take place simply by looking at someone, hearing them speak and finding out their name. Status is another source of difference that is rather easy to identify in most organisations: hierarchical position and departmental affiliation provide good indications. In contrast, the characteristics in the three other clusters – task-related skills, values and personal styles – are more difficult to determine. Here there is a need for frequent interaction or the use of highly refined instruments of measurement such as personality tests. These researchers note the interpretative problems of diversity effects when individual capacities and values are inferred from demographic characteristics, a method that is not always reliable. Besides this concern with measurability, we also note an interest for the degree of variability of differences. Gender and ethnicity are invariable, while values and skills can be seen to be variable. This concern for measurability and variability can be understood in terms of the scholars' objective of studying the effect of diversity on the ability to achieve certain organisational objectives. Correctly measuring differences and gaining insight into the degree of variability correspond with the underlying goal of many Organisation Studies, which is to make a contribution to the ordering process inherent in organising.

The effects of diversity

Using categories of diversity, studies have been set up in order to find answers to questions about the effects of diversity. The main puzzle that scholars are trying to solve in diversity research is "to understand the impact of diversity as a characteristic of social systems - whether they be single work teams or organizations- on work behavior and outcomes" (Cox,

1995, p. 235). Because existing research shows that diversity can influence an organisation's objectives in both positive and negative ways, diversity research is mainly focused on identifying the conditions under which the potential advantages of diversity can best be exploited while at the same time minimising the negative effects.

The effects of diversity however seem to be not very unequivocal. In order to gain an overview of these differences of result, further categories are created. For instance, distinctions are made between these effects at the level of the individual, the group and the organisation (Cox & Blake, 1991; Nkomo & Cox, 1996; Milliken & Martins, 1996). We make here reference to the well-known and accepted (Benschop, 1998) review made by Milliken and Martins (1996). On the basis of 34 empirical studies, these authors make a classification into four types of effects: affective, cognitive, symbolic and communicative.

The *affective* effects refer to involvement, satisfaction, identification, role conflict, role ambiguity, perception of discrimination and social integration. It is mainly on this level that diversity has its costs. Working with people of a different ethnicity or gender seems to entail negative emotions. In order to explain this effect, the diversity literature considers the phenomenon of 'homophily' (Ibarra, 1992). This phenomenon refers to the fact that people are mostly attracted to those similar to them and are more likely to form relationships with them. This makes social integration and identification in a heterogeneous group more difficult (Ibarra, 1993; 1995). Other research (Watson, Kumar & Michaelson, 1993) has, however, shown that these initially negative feelings can decrease over time. These authors argue that preconceived notions and stereotypes can give way to more effective collaboration if the group processes are made subject of reflection and discussion.

A second type is the *cognitive* effect, or the ability of a group to put together information, process it, react to it and then reach conclusions (Milliken & Martin, 1996). Here the results are consistently positive. The cognitive variety of heterogeneous groups involves many different perspectives that can lead to creativity (Hoffman, 1959; McLeod & Lobel, 1992; Watson et al., 1993). The quality of the decision-making can also be higher when cultural minorities offer more counter-arguments, with the result that the ultimate decision is better grounded (Northcraft et al., 1995). In addition, a varied group brings with it a broader network of relationships and more contacts, so that new information can be gathered and brought to bear in the organisation. As a result, a heterogeneous group is able to generate a realistic and more complex picture of the organisation context (Milliken & Martins, 1996).

The third group of effects of diversity concerns the *symbolic* effects. A heterogeneous staff can be a symbol of a socially just organisation for interested parties both inside and outside the organisation. This increases the legitimacy of the organisation, convincing members of minority groups that it offers equal opportunities (Benschop, 1996) and good candidates are often attracted to such organisations. Heterogeneity can also encourage external groups and customers to buy products or services from the organisation (Thomas & Ely, 1996).

The fourth and last category of effects identified by Milliken and Martin are the *communicative* effects. Communication patterns within a heterogeneous group tend to be more formal and less frequent. On the other hand, communication with people from outside the group is more frequent and can create the basis for implementing group decisions.

Besides these four types of effects, studies from an organizational, economical perspective very often stress the economic argument of *efficiency* (McGrath et al., 1995; Northcraft et

al., 1995). One argues that a varied workforce can contribute to a better use of knowledge and skills, since each employee can be put to work where he or she functions best. Such a division of tasks leads to a better fit between function and individual which in turn allows organisations to achieve their objectives more quickly and efficiently. This argument is based on the principle of the right person in the right place and supports the reasoning that organisations will become interested in employing certain groups if the specific advantages of these groups can be demonstrated. This economic argument of efficiency differs radically from the other economic arguments. While here the aspect of specialisation and the division of tasks are being emphasised, the arguments of creativity, innovation and quality underline the importance of cross-fertilisation between different perspectives. Despite a common economic interest, the presence of differences is very differently conceived: on the one hand, difference is seen to be positive in isolation, while on the other differences are seen to be positive in interaction with each other (Janssens & Steyaert, 2001).

Conclusion

In general, diversity research seems to be a quest for a clear classification of sources of difference that allows further study of the effects of these differences. There is a concern for possible overlaps between categories and the correct measuring of differences in each of these categories. Since the effects of diversity are not always unambiguous, here too there is an attempt to make further categories in order to understand the sometimes conflicting results. These classifications according to level and effect are an attempt to give the whole diversity domain a semblance of coherence and consistency. Despite these attempts, a

number of authors are critical of these research methods and look for alternative and

supplementary approaches to studying diversity.

CRITICAL DEBATES IN THE DIVERSITY LITERATURE

Concerned about the future direction of the diversity domain, several scholars have been formulating critical reflections on the way diversity research has been done. Reviewing these critical reflections, we can identify four recurrent themes: a narrow or broad definition of diversity, a stable or dynamic conception of identity, the role of power, and the importance of the socio-historical context.

Narrow or broad definition?

A first, central, question within diversity literature is whether diversity should be narrowly or broadly defined (Nkomo, 1995). Scholars favoring a narrow definition argue that the domain of diversity research should be restricted to specific cultural categories such as race and gender (e.g. Cross, Katz, Miller & Seashore, 1994; Morrison, 1992). On the other hand, scholars preferring a broad definition (e.g. Jackson, May & Whitney, 1995; Thomas, 1991) argue that diversity encompasses all the possible ways people can differ. Individuals do not only differ because of their race, gender, age and other demographic categories but also because of their values, abilities, organizational function, tenure and personality.

Those favoring a narrow perspective argue that diversity based upon race, ethnicity and gender can not be understood in the same way as diversity based upon organizational functions, abilities or cognitive orientations (Nkomo, 1995). Differences due to organizational function or to gender have different effects and therefore, they need to be distinguished. One further stresses that the key issues of diversity are those that arise because of discrimination and exclusion of cultural groups from traditional organizations (Cross et al., 1994; Morrison, 1992). If diversity is a concept that is inclusive to all

individuals, it will become very difficult to identify discrimination practices. The main concern of this perspective is that a broad definition may imply that all differences among people are the same. Diversity studies would then only reach the reductionistic conclusion that 'everyone is different' and, if this conclusion is accepted, the concept of diversity may become "nothing more than a benign, meaningless concept" (Nkomo, 1995, p. 248).

The risk of the narrow approach, however, is that research usually focuses only at one dimension at a time (race or gender) and that one fails to recognize the interactions with other dimensions. Those favoring a broad definition argue that an individual has multiple identities and that the multiple dimensions can not be isolated in an organizational setting. Individuals bring not only their race and gender but also their particular knowledge, personality, and cognitive style to the work setting. If diversity literature wants to understand the dynamics of a heterogeneous workforce, it needs to address the interactive effects of multidimensional diversity. Broadly defining diversity is further considered crucial to prevent the domain of diversity of falling apart into separate subdomains. Having a broad understanding of all types of differences is seen as helpful to understand one's own research better, without necessarily arguing that all differences are equivalent. Another argument favoring a broad definition refers to the potential positive effect on diversity programs. The expectation is that diversity management will become more acceptable if it is not only oriented towards specific groups of employees but if it is inclusive to all employees (Thomas, 1991).

Stable or dynamic conception of identity?

A second issue in the debates refers to a stable or dynamic conception of identity. Relying on social identity theory (Tajfel, 1982; Tajfel & Turner, 1986), several diversity studies link

individuals' identity directly to the social category they belong to on the basis of their individual characteristics. For instance, a person is being identified as 'a woman' if she belongs to the social category of women. The reasoning is that people categorize themselves and others on the basis of how closely their individual characteristics match the prototypes of various groups. Such a categorization process is not merely a cognitive process but is followed by an identification process with affective and evaluative components (Tajfel, 1982). According to this perspective, a person's identity is conceived as stable, fixed, unitary and internally consistent. It is an objective set of characteristics, which leads to a specific identity.

Other researchers however favor a reframing of identity toward relational embeddedness (Shotter & Gergen, 1989), where the concept of identity is not one of cross-time and cross-situational coherence but one of multiphrenic embeddedness (Gergen, 1991). From this perspective, identity is "best seen as a set of contradictory, fluid, contextual constrained positions within which people are capable of exercising choice" (Ely, 1995; p.184). Questions like 'Who am I?' or 'What kind of person am I?' are not answered once and for all, but are being constructed as social interactions and experiences change, not only over time, but also during the work day as one encounters a variety of people and situations. Important in this relational perspective is the fluid, processual nature of identity that is contingent upon social relations (Alvesson & Billing, 1997). Behavior that was formerly attributed to the individual alone is now seen as arising out of the negotiated relationship with other individuals. Even if people belong to the same social category, the meaning of their identity is not necessarily the same because they develop their identity in close interaction with other people who confirm, support or disrupt different identity claims. A person may

see herself as a result-oriented manager as well as a loving mother and a politically conservative voter. Identities are dynamic, multiple and contextual. The discussion on the concept of identity as relational and contextual brings the diversity literature to two other issues e.g. *power* and the *socio-historical context* as two important factors that can create and re-create identity in potentially infinite ways.

Power as key to diversity?

Attention to power - and to the socio-historical context - is put forward mainly by scholars stressing the emancipatory purpose of diversity studies. Especially those who take a narrow definition try to understand differences between people within structures of power inequalities and the socio-historical context. However, the danger of this approach lies in the assumption that it is only those in the oppressed position - women, people of color, … who constitute diversity. It leads to phrases such as 'the diverse group' or 'the diverse person', implying that the condition of diversity inheres solely in members of oppressed groups: only people of color have a race, only women have a gender, and only gay, lesbian and bisexual people have a sexual orientation (Nkomo, 1992; Ely, 1995). This assumption has also important consequences for formulating strategies of how to deal with diversity and identity. If diversity is only a characteristic of a certain, oppressed group, then dealing with diversity means dealing 'correctly' with oppressed groups. For people in dominant positions, this means that they only need to change their perceptions of and behaviors towards those 'others.' As such, prescriptions for change require little of dominant groups in the way of self-reflection or addressing the inner workings or logic of oppressive mechanisms within the organisation. The danger of the notion of diversity as a set of attributes that reside in some people and not

in others is that it leaves dominant groups fundamentally unchanged and relations of domination intact (Ely, 1995). Ely (1995) therefore proposes an approach to diversity which places power at the center and which considers diversity as a certain condition of a relationship instead of a set of attributes. She proposes to define diversity broadly, to distinguish people's experiences into experiences of dominance and suppression, and to explicitly study both. By engaging multiple axes of identity - both dominant and oppressed - within each person, this approach may create the conditions for empathy among people who may otherwise feel frustrated with, guilty about, or angry toward one another. Because such experiences are simultaneously present in each person, members of the dominant group do not have to feel frustration and guilt while members of the oppressed groups do not have to hold onto their position of being dominated. As a result, people may engage more fully, more consciously, and more productively in their relationships and their work.

The socio-historical context of diversity?

A fourth issue in the literature debates refers to the importance of the socio-historical context to fully understand the dynamics of diversity at the workplace (Cox, 1995; Triandis, 1995). Given the importance of intergroup dynamics for diversity, contemporary interactions are considered to be influenced by the legacy of prior interactions among members of those groups. It is the history of intergroup relations, which is the social-cultural background on which the effects of diversity are constructed (Alderfer & Smith, 1982). This background includes not only an organizational, but also a societal component. Occupational roles tend to be segregated by race or by gender on the basis of assumptions about race- or gender-related competences, having their roots in the history of the labor market and in differences in

educational opportunities. Having more attention to the role of history would therefore help to understand how segregation phenomena and oppressed mechanisms function in organizations. This implies that organizations reproduce rather than invent these mechanisms and are therefore reflections of the broader society.

Conclusion

Examining these four discussion points, we come to the conclusion that much of the diversity research has taken the phenomenon of difference out of context, paying too little attention to its social embedding. The point of departure is often a stable category of diversity characteristics, without much concern for the context in which an identity is constructed. The embedding of identity in a network of relations as well as the historical and socio-cultural background of these relationships are aspects that are dealt with in only a limited number of studies.

FUTURE RESEARCH ON DIVERSITY

Making assumptions explicit

Diversity is a complex, controversial and political phenomenon. When, for example, researchers assert that demographic diversity is good for groups, this positive effect rests on the notion that such groups can call on a wide spectrum of knowledge, skills and capacities. The implicit assumption here is that demographic differences are linked to differences in capacities. The opposing assertion that demographic differences are bad for groups is often based on the notion that heterogeneous groups have difficulty coming to consensus over the values that drive the objectives, norms and procedures of the group. Here the implicit

emphasis is on a different cluster of diversity characteristics, namely, beliefs, values and attitudes. Making explicit the diversity clusters one is dealing with and the characteristics that form the focus of the research is very important if the discussion of the effects of diversity is to be meaningful (McGrath et al., 1995). Researchers in the diversity literature are therefore advised to continually make explicit their own underlying assumptions (McGrath et al., 1995). Given the complexity of the phenomenon of diversity, it is impossible to deal with all pertinent questions simultaneously. Choices have to be made concerning the sort of research questions, the research method and the diversity characteristics being studied. These choices are by no means neutral. They issue from the researchers' own values and conceptions. For this reason it is very important that researchers are aware of how the initial research attitude can influence and limit the results and the interpretation.

Opposing assertions on the effects of diversity are not only the consequence of complexity but can also be embedded in the expectations and the power positions of those doing the asserting. For instance, the claim that demographic diversity is bad for military groups such as the army or the police is sometimes backed up by pointing out difficulties that the subordinate group would encounter if it were to work with the demographically dominant group, which might possibly hold prejudices towards them. Such claims and arguments are based on power differences between groups: it is very important to understand whose perspective informs the argumentation. Authors in the diversity literature have not shunned this discussion of the embedding of diversity research in political points of view. Again, the advice is to make assumptions explicit and one further stresses that the elaboration of the diversity domain requires the inclusion of the political component of this phenomenon.

Move beyond categorical thinking, towards holistic thinking

The above literature review indicates that current studies on diversity mainly present diversity in terms of categories. Diversity is defined in terms of group characteristics - often the demographic group characteristics such as race, gender, age or other primary dimensions of diversity. The nature of diversity is presented as discrete rather than continuous, as all discussion on diversity is of 'groups' portrayed as separate, homogeneous entities (Litvin, 1997). The focus of diversity studies is on the differences among clearly differentiated, homogeneous groups. The result is that knowledge of group characteristics is to be the key to understanding others in the diverse workplace.

Categorizing differences however has two important consequences for the way one understands and studies diversity. First, the use of categorisation makes diversity seem to exist only for certain cultural groups, usually the oppressed groups. Differences are isolated from one another and are not be studied in their totality. A second consequence of the use of categorization is the tendency to fix differences. The diverse 'reality' is portrayed as innate characteristics, which define the essence of the individual. Researchers have focused on understanding *the* identity of individuals who belong to a certain cultural group. However, in so doing there is the assumption that belonging to a group entails a well defined, stable identity. Behaviors of a person are to be ascribed to group membership and personal history or particular incidents are being discounted.

These consequences raise the alternative and the need to move beyond categorical thinking. It is important to conceive differences not as categories but rather to relate them to one another within the organisational process. Diverse sources of difference are always playing different roles simultaneously, making it more appropriate to speak of a process of

multiplicity. A holistic approach to understanding diversity may better capture the complexity and interrelatedness of differences.

Incorporate the social embeddedness of diversity

The use of categories to understand and study diversity does not only discount the personal history but also the societal and institutional influences. The essentialized and fixed conceptualization of 'others' denies the overarching influence of macro-level social, political and economic forces (Litvin, 1997). It fosters a narrowly focused, ahistorical and decontextualized assessment of the thoughts and actions of specific individuals in particular organizations. An inherent political conflict is redefined as a cultural misunderstanding between members of two ethnic groups.

These critical reflections on power and historical relationships point to the social embeddedness of diversity. Difference only begins to have meaning in the context of specific relationships and positions in organisations and one needs to be mindful that these relationships and positions are mainly a reproduction of the social fabric, thus again underlining the domain's social character. So, the landscape of diversity comprises relationships of dominance and oppression and requires a historical situating of inter-group relationships. Understanding difference in terms of these two social components moves the issue of diversity clearly outside the boundaries of the organisation.

Conclusion

Diversity studies in Organisation Studies have mainly approached diversity in terms of categories of differences and examining the effects of these different categories on work

related outcomes. However, this approach is simultaneously anti-individualist and anti-collectivist in nature (Litvin, 1997). The anti-individualistic nature is due to the central importance of group membership as the primary determinant of individual identity and consequently its fixed nature. The fixing of people's identity takes place by attributing to them a relatively stable identity. The other is reduced to a minority with certain fixed characteristics. This leaves no room for difference to evolve while we would argue that diversity is not an entity that exists, but a state that is constantly developing. The anti-collectivistic nature of diversity studies is a result of the assumption and notion that what divides members of an organization are their racial/ethnic and other primary diversity characteristics and not the economic/political gap between labor and capital or between 'human resources' and the users of these resources (Litvin, 1997). A more historical and contextualized approach to diversity would pay more attention to this blind spot.

Future research may therefore benefit from understanding diversity as a mosaic of differences, where all differences are interrelated, and where differences are continuously produced and reproduced through the social embeddedness. These reflections correspond with the request of several authors (Benschop, 1998; Cox, 1995; Morrison, 1995) to conduct more field studies in order to provide more insight into the complexity of diversity in organisation and into the way in which processes and practices in organisations (re)produce diversity. This appeal accords with our own concern to approach differences according to process and context. Diversity and difference are not given, but are produced within a network of relations that are situated in a historical context.

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