



Sustainable Development in a Diverse World (SUS.DIV)

POSITION PAPER OF RESEARCH TASK 1.1

“Cultural diversity: Mapping dynamic processes”

Diversity in organisations: Towards a non-essentialistic, dynamic approach

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Introduction

Diversity is mostly defined as the ways in which persons differ from each other (Pollar & Gonzales 1994) or the distinctive characteristics of individuals (Brown, Snedeker & Sykes 1997). While original definitions (Carter et al. 1982) refer to the dimensions of gender, ethnicity, nationality, age and religion, additional dimensions have been included throughout the years to the definition of diversity: sexual orientation, socio-economic class, education level, physical (dis)ability, and moral values. In line with these definitions, studies on diversity in organizations generally define diversity by referring to one or more employees' socio-demographic traits such as gender, race, ethnicity and age, and subsequently examine the effects of these differences on a variety of organizational practices and outcomes (see Milliken & Martins 1996 for a review). In recent years, however, a few diversity scholars have increasingly expressed dissatisfaction with this kind of research. The major point of critique is that, while focusing on the effects of diversity, this approach has left the notion of diversity itself undertheorized (Nkomo & Cox 1996).

The purpose of this position paper is to reflect on the way we define and conceptualize diversity. It intends to contribute to a non-essentialist re-conceptualization of diversity. By using socio-demographic traits as independent variables to operationalize diversity, most diversity studies have de facto understood diversity as a given, fixed individual or group essence (Litvin 1997). In this paper, we want to move away from this approach and propose a more dynamic one in which diversity is not a given, but the product of power relations among individuals and groups, embedded in a particular context.

The paper is structured as follows. We first trace back the roots of essentialism to Aristotelian philosophy and elaborate on Popper's (1945) critique of it. We then develop a non-essentialist, dynamic perspective on diversity along three dimensions: diversity as a relational, context-embedded, and power-laden phenomenon. Following this alternative conceptualization, we then discuss its methodological as well its policy implications.

Essentialism and its implications for diversity

Essentialism and its critique

Social scientists have always interrogated themselves about the nature of knowledge and our ability, as human beings, to understand the world. This epistemological debate, while relevant for all sciences (Popper 1945), is particularly heated in the social sciences where contrasting interpretations of complex phenomena have always coexisted (cf. Sayer 1997). The question of knowledge is a foundational philosophical question that, within the Western tradition, is generally traced back to Aristotle. Aristotle believed that every thing has an ‘essence,’ that is, a distinctive set of properties, which make each thing that thing and nothing else (Janicki 1990; Popper 1945). He thought that to know something, human beings grasp its essence through their intuitive knowledge. The essence of things is further captured in definitions, which form ‘basic premises’ on which truth is built through demonstrative knowledge. In this view, knowledge simply amounts to the gradual accumulation of definitions and of demonstrative knowledge based upon them (Popper 1945).

It was first Popper (1945) who criticised Aristotle’s essentialism as untenable. He argued that an individual’s intuitive knowledge might be contradicted by another person’s intuitive knowledge, and thus cannot be seen as the source of truth. This point is well illustrated by the history of science, where ‘truths’ that were once considered self-evident, have been frequently refuted. In Popper’s nominalist perspective on knowledge, definitions have nothing to do with things’ essences and should rather be seen as labels, conventional ways to ‘cut a long story short’ for the practical purpose of concise communication. Popper also counters the diffuse idea that, if we only could define things properly, we could access truth, because concepts, in terms of which the world is perceived by human beings, never have discrete boundaries and are thus never precise (quoted in Janicki 1990: XI). This derives from the fact that definitions themselves are made by words that would need, in turn, more precise definition, leading to an ‘infinite regression of definitions’ (Popper 1945).

An essentialist view of identity and diversity

Within the social sciences, there is a rich tradition of critique of essentialism (Sayer 1997). Many of these critiques are relevant to diversity because they point to the problems of conceptualizing identity as human beings' essence. According to an essentialist view of identity, identity reflects the 'essence' of an individual or a group. Watson (2002) identifies three core features of the essentialist view¹ of diversity. First, identity –understood as 'who one is, who one wants to be'– is a *fixed phenomenon* regardless of the social and institutional context. Second, diversity, conceived as the other face of identity, is *natural*, or God-given, and should therefore be maintained, although its threats should be fought against (cf. also Haslam et al. 2000). Finally, the individual, personality, motivation and attitudes are viewed as *constant*, regardless of time and place (Watson 2002). These features lead to *reified* understanding of identity, where reification stands for "the process by which abstract arbitrary notions (such as race) become unquestioned and even legitimate concepts' (Chrysochoou, 2004: 50).

Such conceptualization of identity (and, conversely, diversity) has important implications (Watson 2002; Haslam et al. 2000). First, essentialist definitions of gender, racial or cultural identity construct the groups as homogeneous entities, suppressing differences between group members. The definition is necessarily based on a selection of what is considered to be 'essential' to the group and what is not. Sayer (1997) points to the impossibility of defining an essence without specifying in relations to what that essence is established. In order to distinguish a group's essential traits from its accidental ones, a specific behaviour or outcome needs to be used as a reference. Some traits become salient only within specific contexts (Hogg and Terry 2001; Zanoni & Janssens 2004). But such 'external' reference, linking the group to a context, is precisely what is denied in an essentialist perspective, which assumes that essences pertain to the group as such.

This leads us to the second problematic implication of essentialist definitions. Once identity is defined on the basis of an assumed essence, such identity is deterministically seen as the cause of the groups' specific behaviours and outcomes (Sayer 1997). But this denies individuals belonging to certain groups full subjectivity, casting them as mere manifestations of the group they belong to (Zanoni & Janssens

¹ Watson calls the essentialist view as systems-control view (2002: 97).

2004) rather than as agents (Zanoni & Janssens 2005). Third, a group's essence is not only fixed, it is also often either pathologised or idealised (Sayer 1997). This is typically done by constructing differences in a dichotomous way, with a positive and a negative pole, such as male and female, and white and black. This oppositional conceptualization has two effects: it erases hybridity (hooks 1991), and it establishes a hierarchy between the two elements of the dichotomy, taking the positive element as the norm against which the second group is measured and defined as 'lacking' (Zanoni & Janssens 2004).

These implications all point to the way essentialistic definitions of identity conceal the political struggle about identity by displacing the source of identity in a taken-for-granted essence. However, defining group identity, strapping individuals the status of full subjects, reducing them to manifestations of a group, deterministically predicting their behaviour on the basis of their assumed essence, and systematically representing the group as lacking with respect to a dominant group, in more or less explicit ways, are obviously political acts. Identities are defined by authoritative actors, who have the power to speak, and who do so strategically, in ways that produce and maintain unequal power relations. Essentialism is therefore not only conceptually untenable but also harmful to some peoples' lives.

Starting from the specific points of critique of essentialistic conceptualizations of identity and diversity developed above, we develop in the following section an alternative framework to research diversity in as a dynamic concept within organizational settings. We structure our approach along three distinct but related axes of diversity as a relational, contextual and power-laden concept.

Towards a dynamic perspective on diversity

Within a dynamic, process-oriented theory of identity and diversity, individuals are not seen as unidimensional representatives of a socio-demographic group but as evolving and multidimensional, acting and interacting within a specific cultural and historical context, characterized by specific power relations (Litvin 1997). We develop this perspective along three dimensions: the relational nature of difference, its embeddedness in specific contexts, and its relationship to power. For each, we first

present the main argument followed by examples from studies of diversity in organizations.

Diversity as a relational concept

Within our dynamic approach, diversity is a relational phenomenon (Nkomo & Cox 1996). A relational understanding of diversity relies upon the assumption that identity is fluid and contingent upon social relations (Alvesson & Billing 1998; Brickson & Brewer 2001). Identity is not innate, stable or fixed but socially and historically constructed and subject to contradictions, revisions, and change (Hall 1992). A social construction view emphasizes the processes through which identity is accomplished and differences become salient to individuals and groups in organizations (Gergen 1985; Somers 1994; Wharton 1992). In our perspective, relationships between individuals play an important role in these processes of social construction. Questions like ‘Who am I?’, ‘Who is different?’ or ‘Who is the other?’ are not answered once and for all, but are constantly addressed in social interactions. For example, a woman may see herself as a result-oriented manager when interacting with her colleagues, as a loving mother when interacting with her child, and as a politically conservative voter when discussing politics with her friends. Behavior that in the essentialized perspective is attributed to the individual alone is in a dynamic perspective seen as the result of negotiated relationship with other individuals.

In this perspective, while people might share a certain demographic profile, their identities are not necessarily similar, because they develop in interaction with different people. Consequently, in order to understand the meaning of diversity and identity, one needs to focus on relationships rather than on social categories. Such a focus can help us to understand how different types of interactions may influence identity construction. In her recent research, Foldy (2003) distinguishes between ‘spotlighting interactions’ and ‘expression-shaping interactions.’ Spotlighting interactions emphasize particular aspects on one’s identity through which the individual becomes more aware of this particular identity aspect. For instance, when colleagues at work ask a lot of questions about one’s religion and cultural background, these two identity aspects are made more salient. Expression-shaping interactions are interactions that push individuals to change the ways they express their identity. For instance, a black woman downplayed her racial

identity after, in occasional conversations about racism, other (white) women reacted that she was developing a negative attitude.

A second important implication of a relational approach is the need to reconsider the assumption that identities are internally coherent and consistent over time (Potter & Wetherell 1987; Shotter & Gergen 1989). Because individuals interact with different people, who can confirm, support or disrupt different identity claims, their identities are likely to present a number of ambiguities and unsolved tensions. Zanoni and Janssens's (2005) in-depth analysis of four minority employees' identities in the workplace well illustrates this point. They recount the story of a female midwife of Moroccan origins, who usually wears the Muslim headscarf but has to take it off at work. During her interview, she states that she has come to terms with this rule. However, she mentions feeling like a 'double person' and draws from Islamic principles to justify herself for not wearing the headscarf all the time. Her account clearly reveals the tensions and even the potential conflict between her private and professional identities, emerging from relations with different individuals in different contexts. The authors further speculate that minority employees' identities might be particularly ambiguous and incoherent because, as minority members, they are per definition more likely to come in contact with individuals with disparate expectations within more diverse contexts.

Diversity as a context-embedded concept

Within our dynamic perspective, diversity is conceived as the product of a specific social and historical context. While there is an established tradition of research on the processes through which specific identities are socially constructed within the constraints posed by specific contexts (Gherardi 1995), including organizations, this approach has been relatively seldom applied to diversity. The managerially oriented diversity literature generally takes diversity as the sum of given demographic traits, while the psychologically oriented diversity literature focuses on interpersonal interactions (cf. Foldy 2003; Tajfel 1974), paying little attention to the context within which interactions actually occur.

Within organization studies, there is today a rich body of literature on how gender is discursively constructed and actively performed in organizations (Alvesson & Billing 1998; Gherardi 1995). This literature clearly shows that gender is not a universal

concept referring to the physical sex of an individual, but that its meaning rather varies depending on the (language) context in which it is used. A similar approach has also been applied to understand how professional identities are generated and maintained within specific organizational settings (Kärreman & Alvesson 2001; Sveningsson & Alvesson 2002).

Applying such context-sensitive perspective to diversity would reveal that the concept is not universal and has validity only within, and in relation to, a specific situation/context. It has far reaching implications, as the focus will shift from ‘diverse’ employees themselves to the organizational context in which diversity occurs and relevant research questions change accordingly. While most studies today ask as what the impact of increasing diversity is on individual or organizational outcomes, context-sensitive research would ask how contexts shape the meaning of diversity through questions such as: What does the organization do? How are work activities organized? What types of work do ‘different’ people do? Why are they hired in those jobs? Which organizational practices make diversity meaningful in the organization? What does diversity come to mean to organizational members? Which demographic differences are defined as diversity and which are not? Why? What is the rationale of the organization’s ‘diversity management’? How do diversity policy and practices affect diversity?

Through this type of research, one can develop an understanding of diversity as historically limited and locally oriented (cf. Alvesson & Billing 1998). Diversity differs at different times and places and its meaning is therefore temporary and precarious, tied to the context in which the term is used. The stress on specific processes shaping local understandings of diversity allows for a more ‘open’ conceptualization, highlighting that diversity remains subject to variation and contradiction.

Previous research has indicated that the criteria people use to create categories, and the meanings they attach to these categories, change from one context to another. This partly reflects background institutional influences, and is partly due to actors’ agency in shaping their own identities to face a changing social world. For instance, Hamidi (2003) studied three voluntary associations of migrants in France and, contrary to commonsense expectations that all three would serve similar purposes for their members, she found that they affected members’ identities in different ways. Some associations provided their members with an identity of ‘victims’ of the majority society

and did not consider their own power as a resource, resulting in their isolation and segregation. Others stimulated their members to construct a better self-image and to act as agents of their own fate, turning their power into a resource, leading to integration into the majority society.

Within organization studies, Janssens and Zanoni (2005) have shown that the way in which work is organized strongly affects companies' understandings of diversity as well as their approaches to diversity management. Specifically, they found that employees' socio-demographic differences become relevant in a productive context only in as far as they either contribute to or hamper work processes and the attainment of organizational goals. Only these 'relevant' differences are constructed by management as diversity and are actively managed, while other differences tend to remain invisible. For instance, a call centre offering multilingual services employs many migrants and political refugees with different mother-tongues. The knowledge of foreign languages is a key competence within the organization as it is necessary for the company to do business: providing multilingual services to its customers. Cultural/linguistic differences are therefore very relevant in this context and are addressed by both the company's HR management and its diversity management. In this company, cultural/linguistic differences are not only acknowledged but even celebrated, as diversity represents an asset.

Consider a completely different case, a logistic company employing many low-educated female migrants to do low-manual repetitive work. In this case, cultural/linguistic (nor gender) differences do not provide any additional competences to the organization. Differences are 'irrelevant' in as far as they do not cause communication problems among personnel, hampering work. In this context, cultural/linguistic and gender differences tend to remain in the background and are not actively managed: the same HRM is applied to all employees.

We conclude this section with an example of the relevance of context for diversity at a global level. Research on multinationals' corporate social responsibility policies provides a good example of the challenges when taking a context-sensitive approach to diversity. For example, in a Chinese context, the most important demonstration of corporate responsibility is to be honest and not deceive customers, while in an Argentinean context, corporate social responsibility is mainly associated

with job creation and fair treatment of employees (WBCSD 2002). This example indicates that different stakeholders have context-specific needs and expectations, and that knowledge of that local context is fundamental to developing appropriate corporate social responsible policies. Underestimating the importance of local agendas, embedded in specific cultural norms and behaviours, and with a specific moral dimension, can lead to business failures and major damage to corporate reputation.

Diversity as a reflection of power relations

The third dimension of our perspective on diversity is power, referring to the question of how the notion of diversity reflects and affects existing power relations in the organization and possibly beyond. Before we elaborate on this dimension, we discuss how power has been dealt with in previous studies on diversity in organizations.

A first, large group of diversity studies takes a managerial perspective to make the ‘business case’ of diversity. These studies ignore power relations and rather focus on the potential economic benefits of a diverse workforce. Differences are here instrumental to the attainment of organizational goals. To limit potential resistance from dominant groups towards diversity, studies making the business case define diversity in broad terms, including, next to gender and ethnicity/race and disability, other dimensions such as age, corporate background, tenure, cognitive skills and personality (Roosevelt Thomas 1991). In this way, every employee can be seen as ‘different’ and diversity’s link to specific, underprivileged socio-demographic groups is de-emphasized. Such perspective allows diversity to be inscribed within a classical meritocratic organizational paradigm, where the organization is responsible for eliminating discrimination and offering everybody the same opportunities, while individuals are responsible for grasping those opportunities (Liff & Wajcman 1996). This conceptualization actively conceals unequal power relations because it portrays organisations as neutral arenas where different competences are equally valued, which is seldom the case.

Attention to power was initially put forward by those studies stressing the emancipatory purpose of diversity. These studies tend to use a narrow definition of diversity, examining how ethnic/racial and gender differences between people are related to unequal power relations within a specific socio-historical context. However,

despite their emancipatory purpose, such studies tend to see diversity as the attribute of specific oppressed individuals and groups, such as migrants, ethnic minorities and women. The danger of this approach is that it leads to phrases such as ‘the minority group’ or ‘the different 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). Such assumption has important consequences for 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 terms of self-reflection or addressing the inner workings or logics of oppressive mechanisms within a particular context. It leaves dominant groups fundamentally unchanged and relations of domination intact (Ely 1995).

A second group of studies rather looks at diversity through individual careers. Typically, they investigate the effect of specific hiring, management, mentoring, and promotion practices or established networks on the career of individuals belonging to minority groups. They attempt to understand phenomena such as the ‘glass ceiling,’ the segregation of specific groups in certain types of jobs, and wage differentials between individuals and groups. They might explicitly take an ethical standpoint, pointing to the need to give everybody equal opportunities in the organization. Or they strive for a truly meritocratic system, optimally allocating human resources in function of the organizational bottom line. These studies are generally based on psychological theories such as social identification theory, ‘homophily’ (Ibarra 1995), and distinctiveness (Mehra, Kilduff & Brass 1998) etc. They acknowledge that demographic differences are linked unequal power relations; however, they consider such inequality as an outcome of people’s perceptions in interpersonal relations, rather than as an organizational feature.

In the last decade, a growing number of scholars have been studying diversity from a more explicitly critical and dynamic perspective, linking the concept to unequal power relations between managers and employees. Diversity here is no longer seen as a sum of demographic traits, but rather as managerial discourse that aims at controlling

minority employees by defining them in specific ways. These studies generally use discourse analysis to deconstruct the concept of diversity itself to call into question its assumed emancipatory potential for minority employees (Dandeker & Mason 2001; Jones, Pringle & Shepherd 2000; Kelly & Dobbin 1998; Litvin 1997, 2002; Martinsson 2002; Zanoni & Janssens 2004). Contra mainstream studies, these critical studies understand diversity as a both a product of existing unequal power relations within organizations and as a means to reproduce them. Previous research (Zanoni & Janssens 2004) has shown how diversity can be deployed to reaffirm class relations between management and employees. Typically, management can compare ‘mainstream’ workers with ‘different’ workers and hire the more available, compliant and flexible between the two. In the above example of the logistic company, migrant female workers’ extremely weak position on the labour market forces them to be more compliant and flexible than other workers. Management can use diversity as a strategy to leverage their power upon all their employees.

Managers can also exert their power in more subtle ways, through their constructions of diversity (Zanoni & Janssens 2004). Namely, managers construct particular differences positively as ‘value’ or negatively as ‘lack’ depending whether they hamper or contribute to work processes and the attainment of organizational goals. They then accordingly justify the inclusion of workers whose difference is a valuable asset and the exclusion of workers whose difference is a liability. For instance, in the call centre mentioned above, migrants and political refugees are hired because of their language knowledge, which represents a valuable competence for the company (Janssens & Zanoni 2005). On the contrary, in a food company, visibly disabled workers are judged unsuitable for serving customers, as front-line employees need to be ‘presentable’ (Zanoni & Janssens 2004). They are therefore removed from front-line jobs because their difference damages the company. While the former group of workers ‘gains’ in virtue of its difference, the latter ‘loses’ because of it. Both groups are however subject to managerial power, as their differences are measured in terms of their economic value and instrumentally deployed (or erased) in function of organizational goals.

In all these cases, differences are measured in terms of their potential to create value and be profitable, and are therefore structurally embedded in unequal power

relations within organizations. The relationship between differences and value is however not always straightforward. Consider the additional case of the growing Indian call-centre industry, which has bloomed in the last 10 years due to companies' offshoring of IT services. On the one hand, the call centre industry mostly employs Indian women, since they assume they are can better sweet-talk male customers into buying. However, at the same time, job applicants receive training to neutralize their accent and to communicate in a style that is conform to international standards. Or consider the case of Malaysian women moving to the Middle East to work as domestic personnel in wealthy households. In these countries, they provide a solution to the problem of domestic female labour shortage, due to the cultural/religious constrains on Muslim women's work. Further, they are appreciated because of their specific 'cultural difference:' they work very meticulously and are docile employees. However, they are allowed to work in Muslim households because they are Muslim themselves. These last two examples well illustrate that in order to yield economically, difference needs to be balanced with some degree of sameness.

Methodological Implications

Taking a dynamic perspective on diversity has important methodological implications. Namely, we need to adopt methodologies that allow us to research diversity as a relational, context-embedded, and power-laden concept, and to answer the new research questions that emerge within this alternative perspective. Why, how and what we do when collecting data needs to be reconsidered in a more dynamic way. We need to observe, ask, and listen in new ways. There are many divergent methodological traditions, and we believe that while some can more readily adapt to a dynamic perspective on diversity, most, if not all, methodological traditions can reflect on, and incorporate, the following methodological reflections.

A distinction is often made between quantitative and qualitative methodologies. The former gives primacy to collecting large quantities of data from large samples through standardized tools (generally questionnaires of closed questions) to obtain generalizable results on a social phenomenon. The latter gives primacy to collecting

more and more complex data from smaller samples (open-ended interviews, informal contacts, participant observation, focus groups, etc.), which reduces generalizability of results, but allows developing a more in-depth understanding of the studied phenomenon. Qualitative scholars typically claim that their ‘soft’ methods are more suited to capture complex and dynamic relational issues, while quantitative scholars argue that their methods are better able to capture social phenomena objectively. In practice, however, many researchers use both type of methodologies, depending on the specific aims of their research. In some cases, they even mix the two, to provide stronger evidence for their findings (cf. Ely 1995; Ibarra 1995). Here, we do not intend to take a position for one methodology or the other, as we believe that a diversity of methods is of benefit to scientific development. We do however want to rely on our deontology as scholars to stress, that all methods that do not harm the interests or the integrity of our informants have a *raison d’etre*.

Methodological implications of diversity as a relational concept

It is, of course, a truism that no man - or woman- is an island, and that the identities and self- representations of human beings are produced and reproduced in interaction with other human beings. But our scientific models and our research agendas do not always reflect this stand. If we recognize that diversity no longer can be seen as static, or as ‘represented’ in, and by, individuals, but rather must be analysed as aspects of relations, we need tools to capture this dimension. Methodologies must be developed, that allow us to focus on relationships between and among people, rather than on individuals as isolated units.

Researchers working mainly within a qualitative tradition need to expand their vision of their informants. When interviewing, care must be taken not to lock the informants into preconceived categorical boxes, to really listen to and record how they construct themselves in a variety of ways in relation to different people. In what ways do the informants talk about themselves? What is the repertoire of self-presentation? What do these different identities implicate? When observing, care must be taken to follow informants in as many situations as possible. In what situations, together with what people, do informants lay claims to a specific identity? What does this imply? Researchers working with mainly within a quantitative tradition must enlarge the scope

of their questions to try to capture a wider variety of identity-claims. Data collection and processing must be made with an eye to relationships and processes rather than to isolated events.

Methodological implications of diversity as a context-embedded concept

If we recognize that diversity is a product of a specific social and historical context, we must realize that ‘diversity’ is nothing in itself, and that our understanding of the concept is contingent on time and place. Methodologically, we need to clearly differentiate between diversity as a concept used by our informants in a variety of situations, and diversity as an analytical tool. Hence we must develop methodologies that are more context-sensitive. Yet ‘context’ is notoriously difficult to pin down! How much ‘context’ is needed to explain a social or cultural phenomenon? How much ‘context’ does the researcher need to understand a phenomenon? Is the context endless? Do the informants and the researcher have to agree on what constitutes ‘the context’? Another problem is that the definition of context easily becomes tautological. Simply put, the context can be defined as that background –or by the informants’ taken-for-granted-information– we bring into an analysis, in order to make it more comprehensible. No analysis is possible without this contextual information. But we have to be aware that ‘context’ is relative to the direction in which we want to develop our analysis and to whom.

Researchers using qualitative methods often use great care in contextualizing their data. Such writing can be described as ‘thick’ (Geertz 1973), with a rich repertoire of styles. It is also highly language-sensitive. In order to understand this thick writing, we need to share all –or most– of the metaphors and the tropes of the language within which the original text was developed. This is why ‘qualitative’ writing when simply translated from one language to another seldom fully captures the original context. It needs to be translated into another culture that is, re-contextualized for another audience.

Researchers working with mainly quantitative methods do not face the same dilemma. Their linguistic repertoire is typically more limited and seldom contain as much direct rich contextual information in the analysis. Some even claim that their findings are ‘context-free’. With this they mean that their results are valid regardless of

the volition, or perception, of the informants. In such research the ‘context’ is understated and even treated as unproblematic, and researchers implicitly think that their results can be universally understood and valid.

Users of both types of research-methodologies thus need to reflect much more on the problems posed by context. What are our own preconceived notions of context? How does that influence our way of asking questions? We have to be aware that our implicit understanding of context hinges on the issues we are looking at. And if we are looking at diversity in a dynamic way, we cannot take the context of our informants for granted. Finally, we also need to be aware that as researchers we are always part of the context, no matter what methodologies we choose. Such awareness calls for more reflexive ways of doing diversity research.

Methodological implications of diversity as power relations

Realizing that perceptions and constructions of diversity reflect power relations in organizations and wider society has very important methodological repercussions. As we have stated in the theoretical section, it has been common to locate ‘diversity’ in subjugated or non-dominant people or groups. In organizations dominated by men, diversity is associated to women, and in an organization dominated by white people, to people of colour. ‘Others’, those embodying differences from the norm, have typically been singled out to represent diversity, and have thus been in focus in research. We advocate that care must be taken to methodologically include all individuals or groups that are relevant to understand how power relations operate in an organization, in a sub-culture, or in a society.

For example, dominant groups’ definition of diversity in an organization depends on their perception of the basis for sameness and homogeneity. Such perceptions, and the underlying social values and interests, must be grasped, mapped and analyzed. What is the dominant ideology concerning diversity? What arguments are brought out in favour of or against diversity and by whom? Is diversity publicly lauded but privately shunned? Are some people publicly sceptical about diversity? What arguments do they adduce? Whose interests do they defend? What kinds of relations are central to understand how relations of power emerge, and become sustained in this particular social and historical context? Our methodology should be instrumental to

understanding when, how and why ‘diversity’ is brought out, talked about or in other ways communicated as important for the organization (sub-culture or society) or as unimportant or under-communicated.

Here again, as a final remark, it is crucial to understand that, as researchers, we are also enmeshed in power relations. By choosing to research specific organizations, sub-cultures or societies and to ask specific research questions, we make statements. We can never be bystanders but may, through our work, reproduce or challenge power relations. Our methodological toolkit should thus include constant evaluation and reflection of our own practice.

Policy implications

In this last section, formulate tentative policy guidelines in the light of the dynamic approach to diversity delineated above. This is a first attempt to imagine how a new, more dynamic concept of diversity could be applied when formulating organizational and state policies. They originate in our theoretical reflection on what diversity is, as well as in the empirical research we have conducted over the years. Clearly, if we want to avoid the many drawbacks of essentialism, such as ‘dogmatism, unwarranted certainty, a sense of infallibility, conceitedness, intolerance, disregard for other people’s beliefs and opinions, authoritarian argumentation, dislike of criticism’ (Janicki 1990: 114), we need not only to revise the concept of diversity itself, but also to foresee ways of dealing with diversity in organizations and in society at large which are in line with and supportive of a more ‘dynamic’ diversity. We are aware that this is a particularly delicate exercise, as policy requires, more than mere theorization, some degree of ‘closure,’ of certainty, to establish its authority (Janicki 1990). In what follows, we have tried to keep this uneasy balance between openness and closure and to envisage ways to activate a dynamic diversity, avoiding essentialism but trying to maintain a sense of identity (Flax 1990).

Table 1: Policy implications

Dimension of diversity	Companies	The state
1. Relational: stimulate sameness and allow for difference	Foster a strong organizational culture balancing between a common identity and respect for individuals.	Promote a societal culture with a few shared core values and room for individual preferences (compatibility of actions).
	Foster an organizational culture that stresses the organizational ethics, which should be shared by every organizational member, while also allowing for specific individual and collective moral values (cf. Sapelli, 2002).	Foster a culture stressing the shared ethical principles, which should be shared by every body, but which also allows for specific individual and collective moral values.
	Create opportunities for majority and minority employees to work together to reach common goals. This stimulates the development of good interpersonal relations breaking with group stereotypes on both sides. Employees learn to see each other as individuals rather than as members of a specific demographic group.	Create opportunities for individuals with different backgrounds to come in contact with each other and develop shared stakes, for instance through educational, housing, and cultural policies. Shared initiatives stimulate the development of good interpersonal relations breaking with group stereotypes on both sides. Individuals learn to see each other as individuals rather than as members of a specific demographic group.
	Frame issues in general terms rather than as group-specific, and develop general policies and solutions rather than group-specific ones. For instance, avoid casting the problem of work-family balance as a women’s problem, and offer solution to all your employees, not only to women. Or, avoid giving special vacation rights to immigrants that want to travel to their land of origin and rather develop a flexible system where different needs can be satisfied. This will counter stereotyping and avoid the perception that specific measures are unfair.	Frame issues in general terms rather than as group-specific, and find general solutions rather than group-specific ones. For instance, avoid, where possible, developing group-specific policies and rights, as this will fix group identity, increase the perception of unfairness between groups, and foster social division.
	Develop initiatives that facilitate social encounters among employees. This can be done in two complementary ways: 1) through social activities around common issues (for example, activities around children, sport activities, etc.), and 2) through	Develop public spaces that facilitate social encounters. This can be done in two complementary ways: 1) through public spaces around shared stakes (for instance, at the local level, initiatives regarding the neighborhood, school, public services, etc.) and 2) through public spaces where difference is

	activities that explicitly value difference and where individuals get room to express their uniqueness (for instance, intercultural meals, celebration of religious feasts, etc.).	explicitly valued and where individuals get room to express their uniqueness (for instance, around intercultural projects of mixed education for able and disabled children, celebration of religious feasts, etc.).
	Foster a negotiation culture and processes (both formal and informal). Negotiation increases the sustainability of decisions by stimulating moderation, and contributes to de-essentialising differences.	Foster a negotiation culture and processes (both formal and informal). Negotiation increases the sustainability of decisions by stimulating moderation, and contributes to de-essentialising differences.
2. Contextual: develop approaches that take the specific context into account, using its potentialities and minimizing its limitations	Formulate a few core, general policy lines that provide a framework to negotiate specific individual or group solutions. For example, develop a general policy on the principle of flexibility to meet employees' personal needs, and then negotiate solutions to specific situations such as childcare, religious holidays, vacations, etc. in line with the policy. Or, if you operate on a global scale, develop a framework of policies and internal norms from what different contexts have in common, and allow for context-specific arrangements and solutions within that framework.	Formulate a few core policies providing a general framework to negotiate specific solutions in various sectors of society and at various levels. For instance, establish general employment policies, but build in flexibility to develop specific solutions for group-sector- or company-specific problems.
	Develop a balanced, feasible mix of rules and stimulations: 1) establish a few clear, basic rules and apply them consistently, sanctioning unwanted behavior, and 2) develop a variety of specific tools to reward wanted behavior. For instance, include a non-discrimination clause in the company by-laws and sanction infractions, but also reward well-functioning mixed teams and individuals that are particularly open and helpful to others.	Develop a balanced, feasible mix of rules and stimulations. For instance, sanction overt discrimination by law, but also subsidize initiatives that lead to better relationships among individuals with different cultural backgrounds (for instance through research, the development of competences, social and cultural projects, prizes, etc.).
3. Power-related: reduce majority-minority power inequalities	Combat discriminatory practices excluding minority candidates from recruitment. For instance, establish neutral assessment methods, provide intercultural training to recruiters, and require only essential competences to fulfill the requirements of a job.	Evaluate whether state policies are gender-neutral and fair from an intergenerational perspective. Develop a sustainable migration and asylum policy, in line with demographic projections and economic trends.

	<p>Take action against vertical segregation, which is a sub-optimal allocation of human capital. Vertical segregation supports stereotypical images of specific individuals and groups, and structurally confines them to subordinate positions.</p>	<p>Combat the segregation of specific groups in disadvantaged socio-economic positions through complementary education and housing policies and through social orientation programs for newcomers.</p>
	<p>Use your own power to support diversity within the organization, for instance by publicly stating your commitment to it, or by stressing the positive outcomes of diversity on people as well as the organization.</p>	<p>Use the power of the state to establish a positive societal context for diversity, for instance by publicly stating your commitment to it, or by stressing the positive outcomes of diversity on people as well as the country.</p>
	<p>Do not manage diversity solely through human resource management or a diversity manager. Engage different organizational actors both internal and external into the support of diversity. Ask different internal actors to promote diversity in correspondence to their specific roles. Involve external actors who are knowledgeable on diversity and who will help you to create internal support and introduce additional practices. This broadening of diversity management will offer different ways and options for minority employees to be recognized, widening the possibilities for emancipation.</p>	<p>Do not delegate the responsibility of diversity to the private sector only. Engage different organizational actors to promote diversity in different ways, according to their different roles. For instance, support diversity through state agencies, and services directly to individuals.</p>
	<p>Ask only for minimum common denominators among employees, according to the inclusion principle. For instance, allow the use of multiple languages so that native speakers of minority languages will not always be in a disadvantageous position in communication.</p>	<p>Ask only for minimum common denominators among citizens, according to the inclusion principle. For instance, allow for multiple citizenships.</p>

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