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Diversity from the European Perspective

Abstract: *Over the last years, the world "diversity" has become a meaningful part of the language and management in the European companies.*
The purpose of this article is to reflect on the way diversity was being defined and conceptualized in the last centuries. It intends to contribute to the re-conceptualization of diversity, i.e. to the move away from the essentialistic approach in which diversity is perceived as a fixed essence to a more dynamic one in which diversity results from a particular context.
Key words: *diversity, monism, essentialism/non-essentilism, organizations*

The article is structured around three main parts concerning the evolution of approaches to diversity. The first part presents the history of the essential thought on diversity in European antiquity's, Middle Age's and modern tradition, and the second - the dynamic non-essential theoretical response for the first one which is static. The third part formulates policy guidelines in the light of the dynamic approach which could be applied in organizations when formulating organizational policies.

Introduction

In the last decades, literature on diversity has been flourishing and diversity itself has grown to a well-established research domain in organization studies. Despite the impressive amount of empirical studies [Milliken F.J., Martins L.L.,1996, pp.402-433], the lasting inconsistency in results is currently hampering the consolidation of past research and the theoretical development of the domain [Nkomo S., Cox T., 1996, pp. 338-356]. One of the reasons for the current situation is theorists and practitioners treating diversity as an invariable datum and as a static concept. Definitions of diversity usually begin with the list of age, gender, race and ethnicity features which are pinned on individuals as collective labels. In a more sophisticated classification

education, status, income and sexual orientation are added. According to the latest theoretical views, the concept of diversity needs to get more relational and socialized in order to account for complexity and dynamism of the flow of partially organized interactions and communications, which increase diversity and multiply inequalities [Magala, 2009, p.29].

For many researchers diversity remains a 'box' yet to be opened. The objective of the article is opening this box by investigating the meaning of diversity in the philosophical and social spheres from its beginnings in the Ancient until present times, i.e. from the essentialistic to non- essentialistic perspective on diversity. The Essentialistic approach is strongly connected to monism and non- essentialistic – to diversity.

The research method applied in the article is a review of the relevant literature in the field of philosophy and management.

The managerially oriented diversity literature generally takes diversity as a sum of some given demographic traits, while the psychologically oriented diversity literature focuses on interpersonal interactions [Tajfel H., 1974, pp. 65-93] paying little attention to the context within which interactions actually occur.

Essentialism and its implications for diversity

The beginnings of the European thought on diversity started with monism grounded in a universal conception of the human nature. It might be labelled as rationalist monism, exemplified by Greek philosophy, and in the later European history (Middle Ages) it was followed by theological monism, exemplified by Christianity, and regulative monism, or classical liberalism in the modern times. All of the three rely on a universal human nature, though they each define it differently[Parekh, 2000, pp.16-49].

Greek monism, represented by Plato and Aristotle, takes the view that each species of animal, including man, has its own distinct essence or idea that does not vary, and a good life consists of finding a way to inhabit that essence to the full. For the Greek monists, the best route to this good life is defined by an appeal to the rational mind as an element of the human being that can be detached and cultivated. That capacity is not equally available to all individuals, and society should be structured in a way to reflect that hierarchy.

Christian thought is based on a different system of thought which includes the Scriptural inheritance and the writings of Augustine and Aquinas. In this system, the best way of life is a matter of faith. Like the Greek monists, the Christian view is that each member of a specie has essentially the same value or identity, and again, though moral diversity is accommodated, there is a similarly graded hierarchy that can be applied.

Early liberalism, which was formulated by Locke, Montesquieu, and

Tocqueville as a sort of secular version of Christianity, and other writers such as those of the French Enlightenment who were more ambivalent towards religion, can all be classified as influenced by Christianity. Liberalism supplied and institutionalized many of its principle ideas, including the rule of law, the equality of citizens, and the individual as the sole bearer of rights.

Monism whatever labelled has limited interest in understanding other systems, and sees difference merely as deviance, to be ignored or assimilated.

The fundamental question about the ability to understand the world is traced back to Aristotle. Aristotle believed that every thing has an 'essence,' that is, a distinctive set of properties, which make each thing exactly that thing and nothing else.

There is a rich tradition of critique of essentialism. Many of these critiques are relevant to diversity because they point out the problems of conceptualizing identity as human beings' essence. According to an essentialist view, identity reflects the 'essence' of an individual or a group. Watson [2002:p. 97] identifies three core features of the essentialist view of diversity:

1) identity is a *fixed phenomenon* regardless of the social and institutional context
2) diversity, conceived as the other face of identity, is *natural*, or God-given, and should therefore be maintained,
3) the individual, personality, motivation and attitudes are viewed as *constant*, regardless of time and place .

Such conceptualization of identity (and, conversely, diversity) has important implications [Watson, 2002, pp.97-122]:

1) essentialist definitions of gender, racial or cultural identity construct the groups as homogeneous entities, suppressing differences between the group members.
2) identity defined on the basis of an assumed essence is deterministically seen as the cause of the groups' specific behaviors and outcomes.
3) a group's essence is not only fixed, it is also often either pathologized or idealized.

The critique of the essentialistic conceptualizations of identity and diversity lets to develop an alternative framework to research diversity in as a dynamic concept within organizational settings[Janssen et al].

A non-essentilistic view 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 rather as evolving and multidimensional persons, acting and interacting within a specific cultural and historical context, characterized by specific power relations. The approach is structured along three distinct but

related axes of diversity as a relational, contextual and power-laden concept [Janssen et al].

1. Diversity as a relational concept

A relational understanding of diversity relies upon the assumption that identity is fluid and contingent upon social relations. Identity is not innate, stable or fixed but socially and historically constructed and subject to contradictions, revisions, and change [Hall, 1992, pp. 274-316]. A social construction view emphasizes the processes through which identity is accomplished and differences become salient to individuals and groups in organizations. Behavior that in the essentialized perspective is attributed to the individual alone is in a dynamic perspective seen as the result of negotiated relationships with other individuals.

In this perspective, while people might share a certain demographic profile, their identities are not inevitably similar, because they develop in the course of interaction with different people. It is also needed to reconsider the assumption that identities are internally coherent and consistent over time 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.

2. Diversity as a context-embedded concept

Within the dynamic perspective, diversity is conceived as a product of a specific social and historical context. 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 should change accordingly.

Diversity differs in 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 a more 'open' conceptualization, highlighting that diversity remains subject to variation and contradiction.

3. Diversity as a reflection of power relations

The third dimension of the dynamic 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.

Attention to power was initially put forward by the 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.

A second group of studies rather looks at diversity through individual careers. They acknowledge that demographic differences are linked to unequal power relations. 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, pp. 219-233; Zanoni, Janssens 2004, pp.55-74]. Contra mainstream studies, these critical studies understand diversity as both a product of existing unequal power relations within organizations and a means to reproduce them.

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, pp.55-74]. Namely, managers construct particular differences positively as a 'value' or negatively as a 'lack' depending on 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.

Policy guidelines for companies

If organizations wish to avoid the drawbacks of essentialism, such as dogmatism, intolerance, disregard for other's people beliefs and opinions, they need to revise the concept of diversity and activate more dynamic approaches to diversity. Policy guidelines in the light of this dynamic approach is presented in the table below.

Table 1. Policy implementations

Dimension of diversity	Companies
1. Relational: stimulate sameness and allow for difference	Foster a strong organizational culture balancing between a common identity and respect for individuals

	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).
	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.
	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 unfare.
	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 acitivities, etc.), and 2) through activities that explicitly value difference and where individuals get room to express their uniqueness (for instance, intercultural meals, celebration of religious feasts, etc.).
	Foster a negotiation culture and processes (both formal andinformal). 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.
	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.
3. Power-related: reduce majorityminority 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.
	Take action against vertical segregation, which is a suboptimal allocation of human capital. Vertical segregation supports stereotypical images of specific individuals and groups, and structurally confines them to subordinate positions.
	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.

	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
	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.

Source: Jannsens M., et al. Diversity in organizations: Towards a non-essentialistic, dynamic approach, Position Paper of Research Task 1.1 Cultural diversity: Mapping dynamic process, Sustainable Development in a Diverse World (SUS.DIV)

Conclusions

When evaluating the first decade of diversity research in 1996, it was concluded that most studies examined the effects of diversity but failed to properly theorize the notion of diversity itself. Following the plea for more theoretically sound approaches, several scholars started studying diversity and diversity management as a discourse. They critically examined how the new discourse of diversity originated, and how it operates in organizations, professions, and broader institutional settings. These studies have made an important contribution to the diversity literature. They have de-essentialized diversity, by showing that demographic characteristics are not just given, but rather socially constructed. Their critical, theoretically sound re-conceptualization of diversity has an important implications for management practice. Wanting to effectively manage diversity any organization should treat diversity as dynamic concept and consider its three determinants being aware that diversity is relational, context – embedded and it is the reflection of power relations.

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