

EDITORIAL

Diversity at a crossroads: How diversity research can contribute to the fight for social justice

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Four decades ago, the conservative president of the world's biggest economy changed the face of diversity research in organisations. The president in question is Ronald Reagan, who promoted a political ideology of "colour blindness, the dismantling of race-conscious affirmative action in employment, deregulation, and minimal government intervention in social issues" (Nkomo et al., 2019) and advanced a discourse that positioned group-based solutions to discrimination and workplace exclusion emanating from the Civil Rights Act of 1964 as antithetic to individual rights, individual freedoms, and individual agency. He cemented this ideological discourse through the prediction of the Hudson Institute's 1987 report *Workforce 2000: Work and Workers for the Twenty-First Century*, which claimed that racial and ethnic minorities and women would, by the turn of the millennium, constitute the majority of the net new entrants into the U.S. labour force without any further action in antidiscrimination and equal rights practices. This ideological, political context triggered the shift in HR practitioners' and researchers' discourse, from an initial antidiscrimination and equality perspective to 'the business case for diversity'. A plethora of research (from fundamental to practitioner and policy reports) tried to prove how diversity improves the bottom line of businesses, by

mirroring the customers make-up and better adapting products to their needs (i.e., the access-and-legitimacy paradigm, Thomas & Ely, 1996); by drawing from a diverse pool of employees, which would solve demographic issues such as the aging of the population (European Commission, 2006); by capitalizing on the human capital of these diverse employees and thereby driving innovation (McKinsey & Company, 2020).

Four decades later however, meta-analytical findings show a much more complex picture of the dynamics that diversity brings in organisations than these linear claims. Systematic evidence at both team (van Knippenberg, De Dreu & Homan, 2004) and organisational levels (Mor-Barak et al., 2016) link diversity to both beneficial and detrimental outcomes. On the one hand, diversity can boost creativity in work teams (Curșeu et al., 2016; Homan et al., 2015), but it can also increase interpersonal conflicts (De Wit, Greer & Jehn, 2012), mistrust and animosity (Holmes et al., 2020; Mor-Barak et al 2016). Interventions that increase people's emotional awareness (Boroș, 2020; Boroș & Vîrgă, 2020) and contribute to creating more inclusive climates are the sine qua non mediator of diversity success (Holmes et al 2020; Mor-Barak et al 2016). However, this inclusion is not easily achieved in organisational interventions alone.

Organisations are open systems that exist in historical, social and cultural contexts. Unfortunately, diversity research doesn't always recognize that and instead paints an incomplete picture of situated diversity in the workplace (Nkomo et al., 2019).

In their editorial for the special issue on diversity theorizing in *Academy of Management Review* (2019), Stella Nkomo and her collaborators talk about the limitations of diversity research in the past decades, both in content (the what) and in methodological approaches (the how). Reviewing decades of mainstream diversity research, the authors point to the predilection of the field to ontologically position diversity as any attribute along which a person is different, allowing for the move from what was termed as 'surface' diversity (e.g., socio-demographics) to 'deep-level' diversity (Harrison et al., 1998). While this line of research was crucial for team-level research and advancing the knowledge concerning team dynamics (Phillips & Loyd, 2006), it also allowed to eschew the issue of dominance of certain groups in society (e.g., the issue of 'white privilege', for instance – McIntosh, 1988) and further the research on power dynamics and diversity in organisations (a notable gap that research at group level started tackling more systematically only recently – Greer et al., 2017). The great majority of studies also used – for the sake of simplicity of design and analyses – single categories of diversity; this is one of the big gaps recently addressed at the group level by faultlines research (Homan et al., 2007). One immediately notices from these last couple of sentences (and in line with Nkomo et al.'s 2019 observations) that the most notable advancements in the field of diversity come from group-level studies (i.e., the micro-level of theorizing), mainly pursued in a positivistic approach, with elegant (often experimental), clear-cut designs. While such designs bring significant contributions to the advancement of knowledge, any HR practitioner is aware of the much messier reality of diversity in organisations and the need to actively bring issues of power, privilege, history and the larger context (e.g., of the industry or the

larger society) into the equation. It doesn't come then as a big surprise to see that, all these decades later, meta-analyses on the effectiveness of diversity trainings paint a rather gloomy picture. In their meta-analysis of 40 years of diversity trainings, Katerina Bezrukova and collaborators (2016) show that while cognitive learning persists after such trainings, affective/attitudinal and behavioural changes do not (with the impact being often reduced to two weeks post-training). The authors bring evidence that the most impactful and lasting interventions are trainings integrated in larger organisational interventions (Bezrukova et al., 2016). However, these are few and far between, not only on account of organisational costs, but also because the research here is lagging behind: The most noticeable gap in the 'how' of diversity theorizing in management sciences is the missing links between the micro-meso-macro levels of theorizing; specifically, "although societal systems of domination (i.e., racism, sexism, patriarchy, heteronormativity, and classism) are particularly relevant to understanding diversity in the workplace, the macro social-historical-political context has been largely neglected within management studies and diversity theorizing" (Nkomo et al., 2019: 502).

This is an especially troubling finding as it can be used as an argument against diversity trainings instead of thinking further how to better integrate diversity management interventions in the life of an organisation and the larger fabric of society. Why does it matter, you will ask, since diversity and inclusion interventions seem to be quite fashionable and currently on the agenda of many organisations? Because four decades later after the start of our story, another president of the (still) world's biggest economy, in the midst of a powerful social movement wanting to reveal and end the lingering systemic racial inequalities in the country, pulls federal funding for diversity awareness trainings, on account of them being 'divisive, anti-American propaganda'. One can only stop and wonder what implications this new policy orientation will have for the

field of diversity, given the implications of the last political intervention in diversity research (i.e., systematic evidence revealing that most research that tackles the macro-level of theorizing predominantly uses a resource-based view of the firm and competitive advantages brought on by diversity, and largely misses input from sociology, political theory, feminist studies and critical theory – Nkomo et al., 2019) and the fact that so much of this research remains to date very US and Western-centric. To the point, the top outlets for publishing management research are US or UK-based: of 13 journals ranked in Financial Times – so-called A* journals – only one is non-Anglo-Saxon (i.e., US or UK-based), and that one is based in The Netherlands.

The critique of the lack of cultural and historical-political context of mainstream diversity research, where context is often equated with task environment, diversity climate, or group culture, has been long and often raised by critical management research (Zanoni et al., 2010). This line of research strives to fill in these gaps. However, upon analysing the bulk of research published in this stream, one notices the high frequency of positioning research in Western philosophical and theoretical frames: a favourite in terms of framing being Marxism, with Foucault (from a philosophical standpoint) and Lacan (psychoanalysis) also richly informing critical management research. But how valid are these frames in non-Western settings, in fundamentally different systems of thought? Researchers from the Global South decry this positioning and the Western-centrism of diversity theories, be they mainstream or critical management (Holvino, 2010). The missing voices of the Global South and of local perspectives, culturally and historically situated, has been repeatedly raised in the leading journals (e.g., George et al., 2016) – and yet the same journals keep publishing research that fits into the existing paradigmatic, theoretical and methodological expectations (Boroş et al., 2020; Bosch et al., 2015).

This is where local journals of management science are needed to step up and make a stronger, original contribution to the

general state of diversity research. Where, instead of replicating mainstream theories and studies, journals such as Human Resource Psychology can promote research that is:

- *Situated culturally and historically:* The easiest point to make here is about understanding the communist heritage in Eastern Europe and its current impact on organisational dynamics (e.g., Curşeu & Boroş, 2011), both within Eastern European systems, as well as in cross-cultural collaborations in multinationals. But beyond that, how do older systems of beliefs and cultural practices (such as, for example, beliefs in and the relation with the afterlife and the sacred dimension – Curşeu & Pop-Curşeu, 2011) shape current social interactions in the workplace; how do they shape goal-setting, organisational commitment and work-life balance? We need more in-depth input from local systems of thought (Konadu et al., 2021), we need the cultural and historical context in which studies are conducted to be part of the conversation and the theoretical modelling, not just a footnote in research context.
- *Taking into account power relations between minorities and majorities in the workplace, and that tells both stories and their interdependencies.* In the past, diversity research often approached employees who are a minority in the workplace as targets to be managed, rather than as agentic actors (Dye & Golnaraghi, 2017). However, ultimately it is the (minority) employee's decision to act or not upon diversity initiatives the organisation sets out (Cha & Roberts, 2019). This agentic potential gained a lot of traction in recent years, with new models bringing together the perspective of the minority as agent and the organisation as enabler (Van Laer & Janssens, 2017, Zanoni & Janssens, 2007). More research is

needed that continues this agentic approach, in conjunction with better insights as to why majority members themselves can act as allies and supporters (allyship insights having gained much prominence in journals such as HBR in 2020 – Creary, 2020; Melaku et al., 2020).

- *Intersectional*: So far, an extensive body of diversity theorizing has focused mainly on single categories of difference in isolation from others (Nkomo et al., 2019) -i.e., gender or age or race or ethnicity. Although a number of scholars have proposed the adoption of multiple demographic characteristics and intersectional lenses (e.g., Cha & Roberts, 2019; Holvino, 2010; Liu et al., 2019; Ramarajan, 2014), this is reflected less in empirical studies in mainstream diversity research (intersectionality remaining mainly the staple of critical management - Nkomo et al., 2019). Single categories of diversity, pointing to one feature of being different, i.e. a woman, omit the opportunities to draw on identity resources coming from the simultaneity of multiple identities, hence taking into account intersectional phenomena (Cha & Roberts, 2019). This is all the more limiting as there is research showing that women could “neutralize the disadvantageous lower status that is associated with being a women by foregrounding her other identities to construct a powerful and successful professional identity” (Janssens et al., 2006: 140). Future theory building should therefore position identities as fluid and intersectional (Holvino, 2010; Liu et al., 2019). This theoretical stance is reflected in a call for more idiographic research which gives voice to the “hidden stories at the intersections of race, ethnicity, gender, class, nation” (Holvino, 2010: 248) in the workplace. This finally leads us to

the last two characteristics of new diversity research:

- *Combines qualitative and quantitative approaches more actively and bridges the divide between the two*. Since most researchers specialize in one or the other, this is also a call for more diverse collaborations in authorship, and true co-creation of research questions and design that span fundamental to applied, insight and internal validity to ecological validity questions. Variety in research methods would also continue the contribution of different systems of thought and knowing (Konadu et al., 2021): some cultures capitalize less on verbal expression, and instead complement it or even rely more on different sources of knowing, such as insight, and different means of expression from embodiment to music and visual artifacts (Baggini, 2018; Curşeu & Pop-Curşeu, 2011). How can we capture this in research in organisations and broaden the data sources and methods we use, in order to make room for new insights and new means of giving voice to respondents?
- *Actively reaches out to a diversity of respondents*, thereby addressing the lack of data on difficult to reach participants (Mehra et al., 1998). In doing so, research becomes a megaphone for the unheard voices, those who, in diversity interventions (be they organisational or related to international development) suffer the consequences of solutions that are put forward often without them being asked. This means a more tenuous data collection process; reaching out to less educated respondents, and finding ways to ask the questions differently than a standard questionnaire or even typical interview (DeSmet & Boros, 2020). Without our research methods broadening (and learning from

disciplines such as ethnography and anthropology), the very issue of representation, central to diversity research, is at stake.

The covid-19 pandemic revealed to an unprecedented extent the existent inequalities in societies and between nations. There are calls from the heads of the main global monetary funds (Worldbank, IMF) to actively work on addressing raising world poverty. The fight for social justice – between and within societies needs more impactful support from diversity research: frames to better understand and create awareness of social and organisational dynamics; pathways to reconciliation and reparation; ways forward for collaboration that is mindful of difference and learns to build bridges that respect these differences and give them a voice in the global conversation. At organisational level, a recent paper on ‘COVID-19 and the Workplace: Implications, Issues, and Insights for Future Research and Action’ (Kniffin et al., 2020) written by some of the biggest names in OB research, singles out understanding the various experiences of different categories of employees (i.e., diversity in the workplace) as a core driver in modelling the new ways of working. Diversity research has now a real chance to make a social impact in the crafting of ‘the great reset’ (WEF, 2020) both at organisational and societal level. But this cannot happen if we all continue to pursue the old, well-established tracks of research, just to publish the same things in the same journals, and if journals keep launching the same calls for papers and accepting the same type of work. This is why, now more than ever, diversity researchers and HR practitioners need to actively choose the path they want to carve forward. This is the time of revolution. This is the time for diversity researchers and practitioners to lead the way in the fight for social justice and make the difference we all dreamed of when we first embarked on a journey in this field.

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