

# *Examining the Contours of Workplace Diversity*

## *Concepts, Contexts and Challenges*

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Few social phenomena have attracted as much attention in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries as that of diversity and multiculturalism. Debates and policies regarding both diversity and multiculturalism are to be found in many different social sectors including education, health, government, the media and the workplace. While the United States is often regarded as a pioneer in the diversity movement, its preoccupation with diversity is now echoed across the world in countries ranging from Australia and France to Israel and Jamaica. What was once a concern mainly for so-called 'new' immigrant nations such as Canada, Brazil, the United States and New Zealand has increasingly become an issue for 'older' countries in Europe, Asia and the Middle East as well. Recent large-scale population movements across the globe (Appadurai, 1990) in the form of refugees, guestworkers and immigrants have changed the erstwhile homogeneous face of many countries, and have triggered a range of cultural tensions and visible exclusionary practices within them. Not surprisingly perhaps, an interest in diversity can now be found across the world.

This handbook focuses exclusively on workplace diversity and all its attendant problems, tensions and achievements. Before entering into a detailed discussion of our project, we feel that the term 'diversity' is in need of some unpacking. The dictionary definition of diversity is of little practical value because, in the material world of workplaces, the term holds multiple overlapping and conflicting meanings (Hays-Thomas, 2004; Prasad & Mills, 1997). One reason is that so many stakeholder groups – managers, consultants, activists, unions and academics – all claim ownership over the term and offer their own interpretations of it. To

complicate matters further, diversity has an ambiguous and intangible connection to North American legal practices, social movements and public policy initiatives such as Title VII of the Civil Rights Act, various pieces of anti-discrimination legislation, affirmative action (in the United States and Australia) and employment equity (in Canada and the UK). At the same time, it is important to remind ourselves that diversity, unlike discrimination, is *not* a legal term and has no legal force behind it (Prasad, 2001; Yakura, 1996). Rather, managing diversity has primarily emerged as a voluntary corporate initiative directed at the systematic recruitment and retainment of employees belonging to diverse social identity groups.

At its core, the concept of diversity is all about matters of *difference* and *inclusion*. However, there remains no easy agreement on either the nature of differences that should be considered or the kind of inclusionary measures that should be practiced. At one extreme, a section of the consultant discourse on diversity favors including all conceivable elements of difference including leadership styles, physical characteristics, cognitive patterns and personality traits in addition to demographic differences in age, gender, race, ethnicity and religion (Thomas, 1996). The problem with this approach is that it treats all differences as meriting equal attention, and fails to recognize that some differences (e.g. race or sexual orientation) are likely to present more severe disadvantage in the workplace than others (such as hair color or communication styles).

Others, such as Hays-Thomas (2004) and Linnehan and Konrad (1999), propose that a more meaningful understanding of diversity would focus on groups that have *systematically* faced discrimination and oppression at work. These *historically disadvantaged groups* would typically include non-whites, women, religious and ethnic minorities, individuals with physical disabilities, older employees, gays, lesbians and bisexuals, transgendered people, older employees. In many industrialized and economically advanced countries, many of these groups also receive some measure of protection from discrimination under local laws. This protection is one reason why workplace diversity tends to be often equated with anti-discriminatory regulation and equal employment policies. Our position in this handbook is that workplace diversity is a more relevant concept if it focuses on those differences that have been systematically discriminated against, irrespective of whether or not they receive legal protection. Thus, from our perspective, gender and race differences (which are often covered by the laws of various countries) are still important as are differences in sexual orientation and body weight (which receive less protection under the law).

Our reasons for making this choice are twofold. First, differences in power and status resulting from ascriptive characteristics are inconsistent with the logic of merit-based rewards in organizations. As such, the contradiction between the meritocratic ideology espoused by many work organizations and actual differences in treatment and reward experienced on the basis of demographic group memberships creates a set of substantive problems in need of investigation and action. Second, the literature on individual differences in organizations has a long history, and variation in personality, cognition and behavioral style has always been present in work organizations. Managerial interest in the topic of diversity

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was not precipitated, however, until members of historically excluded demographic groups began to make inroads into desirable occupational, professional and managerial positions previously reserved for the dominant majority (Konrad, 2003). Attending to the genesis of the field is important for ensuring that our scholarship does not ignore fundamentally important features of the diversity phenomenon. Studies that assume away status and power differences between groups threaten to result in a misleading set of findings that could direct organizational efforts away from the problems and opportunities with the greatest impact on outcomes. Importantly, the disadvantages experienced by historically excluded groups have greater impact on the lives of organizational members, and directing our research toward giving voice to the experiences of those who have historically been disenfranchised may be helpful for making important material improvements to the lives of many.

It is important to note here that certain kinds of difference are likely to have greater salience in some places and at certain moments than in different times and in different places. In some Scandinavian countries, for instance, progressive laws accommodating women in the workplace have made gender differences less of a concern than in others such as Malaysia, where rampant gender discrimination is practiced, or the United States, where working women are at a tremendous disadvantage because of the meager maternity benefits provided by the state. Yet, within Scandinavia itself, differences in race and religion clearly play a tremendous part in sustaining employment discrimination. Again, employers in some Western European countries are noticeably open toward gays and lesbians, while simultaneously being adverse to hiring Asian and North African immigrants. By contrast, sections of the United States are aggressively hostile to individuals with alternative sexual orientations while being open to hiring credentialed foreigners from different parts of the world. Additionally, some dimensions of diversity intersect with conventional categories of difference and protected social identity groups in new and problematic ways. In both Canada and the United States for instance, linguistic differences are often responsible for prejudicial attitudes and discriminatory actions against Francophones and Hispanics irrespective of gender and race, and sometimes compounding issues of gender and race. In sum, therefore, diversity is a geographically and culturally contingent phenomenon, and needs to be understood as such.

In addition to raising questions about what constitutes difference, the diversity discourse also raises questions about the meaning of inclusion. At a simplistic level, workplace diversity is all about ensuring that diverse social identity groups are fairly represented in private and public organizations in any country. However, the cultural dimension of diversity also implies that diversity is much more than a matter of representation. Diversity is also about *respecting* and *valuing* differences, whether they are gender-, race- or ethnic-based differences in lifestyles, appearance, linguistic proficiency, communication and decision-making styles, etc.

These questions about cultural inclusion often get played out in contemporary debates on cultural assimilation versus cultural pluralism. Cultural assimilation has a long history of liberal support in the West, and broadly favors homogenization

followed by inclusion under the rubric of integration (Glazer, 1997; Suarez-Orozco, 2002). Within assimilationist thinking, once cultural differences (language, rituals, communication styles, etc.) are voluntarily surrendered in favor of the dominant cultural practices, integration will automatically take place and group differences will cease to matter. Assimilation thus demands a considerable amount of cultural sacrifice in return for inclusion and acceptance in the broader society and organization. We would argue that from a diversity perspective, assimilation is actually relatively monocultural, and therefore fundamentally antagonistic to an acceptance of, let alone valuing, cultural differences.

In the last 20–30 years, the notion of cultural pluralism has gained popular support, and offers an alternate approach to dealing with difference. Rooted in the philosophy of multiculturalism (Spivak, 1987; Taylor, 1994), pluralism requires that the dominant culture (of either states or organizations) accepts rather than absorbs cultural differences through co-existence rather than integration. In other words, cultural pluralism is far more sympathetic to the notion of diversity and is aimed at developing policies and mechanisms of adjustment to difference. Needless to say, both cultural assimilation and cultural pluralism engender different kinds of conflicts and tensions. Assimilation leads to the suppression of cultural difference and results in resentment among minority groups and unrealistic expectations of cultural integration among majority groups. Cultural pluralism, on the other hand, leads to struggles over cultural spaces in organizations and societies. Many of the chapters in this volume will either directly or indirectly touch upon some of the issues raised here. Additionally, as workplace diversity gains increasing visibility and legitimacy in organizational and academic worlds, it is also confronted with a whole host of new challenges, opportunities and dilemmas. The remainder of this chapter addresses some of them in greater detail.

## THE DIVERSITY LEXICON

As noted earlier, language in the field of workplace diversity is contentious and contested. The proliferation of terms and the implied and often ignored political implications present a literal and literary quagmire for scholars and practitioners alike. It is important to use language that situates diversity issues within specific historical contexts in order to avoid implications that particular identity groups are lacking or deficient in some way. One responsibility of diversity scholars is to be aware of their usage of terms in order to provide syntactical leadership in their discussions within and beyond academe.

We prefer terms commonly used in anthropology and sociology, such as ‘systematically excluded’ or ‘historically disadvantaged’, because they explicitly recognize the structural component of the diversity plus an asymmetric distribution of power. Language rooted in disciplines such as psychology or economics commonly situates the fundamental mechanisms driving diversity dynamics within individuals which make structural forces historical contexts, and the influence of

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power elites less visible. Confusion around terminology is most apparent within gender studies with differences drawn between sex, sex role category and gender (West & Zimmerman, 1991: 14). Scholars in the tradition of critical race studies eschew the term 'diversity' because they see it diluting the interest of particular identity groups. A parallel argument occurs in gender studies, namely that diversity serves to further mute the concerns of women (Sinclair, 2000). As Nkomo and Cox noted in an earlier review, 'The concept of identity appears to be at the core of understanding diversity in organizations' (1996: 339). Furthermore, social identity, or that component of identity based on membership in social groups (Tajfel & Turner, 1986), theorizes that our identity does not have meaning independent of the larger societal context.

Some terminology has legal roots, which is useful because legal issues arise very clearly within historical and national contexts. At the same time problems arise because such language is peculiar to a specific legal system and consequently meanings differ internationally. A central example is the terminology of equal employment opportunity (EEO) and affirmative action (AA). The same language is used across countries but the meanings and workforce implications vary due to the specific legal framework of the nation. For example, the AA legislation in Australia (Hede, 2000) broadly incorporates both the EEO legislation and the President's executive order on AA of the United States (Konrad & Linnehan, 1995); while, in New Zealand, initiatives labeled as EEOs mirror the Australian situation (Sayers, 1994) but the legislation applies only to governmental organizations.

Selecting terminology incurs the risk of choosing the linguistic roots and historical assumptions that are infused in the word. The choice of term therefore becomes a declaration, a marker of one's ontology and polemic. Consequently the origin of the term is of key importance signifying the direction of the question: through whose eyes? We argue that all terminology is problematic given the infusion of power and privilege, disadvantage and deprivation, embedded in social identity group relations. Clearly, the labeling of significant identity groups is not straightforward.

Most research and discussion has focused on 'visible' characteristics such as sex and race (Foldy, 2002), although more recent developments (Kirton & Greene, 2005) have been to extend the research domain to 'invisible' diversity. Disabilities (Chapter 16) and ethnicity may be both visible or invisible (Chapter 13). An added layer of complexity to invisible diversity in the workplace is the individual's decision-making process of becoming visible or 'coming out' (Chapter 15). Without disclosure (verbal or non-verbal) the person may 'pass' as a member of, for example, the heterosexual dominant group, an option not afforded members of visible diversity groups.

The preferred labels of identity groups also may change over generations as the specific socio-political context shifts. For example, in the United States, older people may use and refer to themselves as 'blacks' while more common usage by younger people is 'African Americans'. Conversely, in the UK people of African origin color prefer to refer to themselves as 'black' (Chapter 21), while South Asians are less comfortable with this terminology which they see as being too invariant. Within groups, members may disagree over terms such as Hispanic or Latina. In Canada the

indigenous people are referred to as 'First Nations peoples' and in the United States, 'Native Americans'. With the increasing strength of the political voice of indigenous peoples on a global scale there have been moves to adopt the preferred name by the group members such as 'Inuit' in Canada rather than a colonizer's term such as Eskimo. Within Australia (and to some extent the United States) there has been a noticeable shift from the encompassing label Aboriginal Australian to the specific tribal name, for example Koorie. A clear example of the historical context embedded in the language comes from New Zealand (NZ). The labeling of the indigenous people as Maori was implicitly a colonizing act, assimilating previously distinct tribes under a common term. In a somewhat reciprocal manner, the word developed by Maori for the colonizers (of largely British origin) is 'Pakeha' (King, 2003). Today the term Pakeha is embraced by some European New Zealanders while it is vehemently resisted by others, with rebuttals such as 'we are all New Zealanders' (Mikaere, 2004). For those individuals who consciously adopt the label Pakeha there is a recognition that they are descendants of the colonizers. Thus the term 'Pakeha' makes explicit the political and cultural history of colonization.

Some protagonists would identify this debate and degree of specificity as superficial 'political correctness', an overused and impotent rebuke aimed to belittle and undermine the concerns of groups who historically have had lesser power. For example, within the United States there is common recourse to the right to 'free speech' contained in the First Amendment to the Constitution. Free speech has parallels with the right to a free lunch in a business world. 'Free' carries obligations and responsibilities where there is interaction with others. Invoking this aspect of the Constitution to insult others is immoral, if not illegal. There are examples of nations where there is strong pressure not to use politically charged identity labels; for example, within post-war democratic Germany the use of the label 'Nazi' is in effect deemed unconstitutional and effectively banned.

There is much debate amongst scholars and consultant/practitioners over the lexicon of workplace diversity. Managing diversity was a human resource management intervention adopted initially in the United States and Canada (Agocs & Burr, 1996). 'Managing diversity' is the most common label for diversity-related work (Foldy, 2002) within businesses, although not necessarily government organizations. However, within this umbrella term there is a plethora of expressions: 'managing', 'affirming', 'valuing' and even 'tolerating diversity'.

Imbued in all these concepts are variable political assumptions of the 'rightness' of hierarchy and disbursement of power within and amongst identity groups. We briefly outline the discussion around each of the terms and highlight the diversity (*sic!*) within the language which is an intrinsic part of the following chapters. Some authors are explicit about their usage while others are not.

The dilution of the powered implications within social identity become apparent in the much cited definition by Thomas (1991: 12):

Diversity includes everyone: it is not something that is defined by race or gender. It extends to age, personal and corporate background, education, function and personality, It includes life style, sexual preference, geographic origin, tenure with the organisation ... and management and non-management.

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Such a definition of 'diversity' views every individual as different and equally valued. Consequently differential power between identity groups is ignored and any historical asymmetric positions of power and privilege continue to be enshrined.

Some writers have developed a hierarchy of appropriateness for the terms: for example, Thomas (1990, cited in Agocs & Burr, 1996) claimed that managing diversity is a more advanced concept than valuing diversity, which, in turn, is a higher form of organizational response than affirmative action. These responses are part of the progressive distancing and backlash against AA and EEO initiatives and illustrate the desire to shift discussion to a managerialist discourse focusing on measurable objectives, thereby seeking to obliterate power from the conversation. Prasad (2001) has also argued that the discourse of workplace diversity has adroitly pushed questions of recurring employment discrimination to the background, while simultaneously showcasing individual corporate efforts to fill a few positions with women and minorities. Managing diversity has been differentiated from EEO and AA by other writers (Cassell, 2001; Hay-Thomas, 2004) but suffice to say in contrast to the group focus of EEO, managing diversity requires individual assessment and treatment presumably in a way that does not incite discrimination or favoritism.

*Managing diversity* carries with it the legacy of managing: the traditional classic notions of control, leadership, organizing and power. This diversity framework is situated within the hierarchical corporate control systems where organizational authority lies with senior management. Workplace diversity then becomes the object of control and organizing, and senior managers are the legitimate instigators of organization change. They are in the ambiguous position of predicting and pre-empting the needs of multiple identity groups 'lower' in the organization. Managing diversity then becomes the task of 'double-guessing' the needs and desires of the marginal groups (Jones, Pringle & Shepherd, 2000) by managers who have greater power. Yet as Alvesson and Willmott (1996) argue, 'emancipation is not a gift to bestow' (p. 33) and acts of assimilation and integration can 'estrangle the individual from the tradition which has formed his or her very subjectivity' (p. 174).

An alternate twist on managing diversity comes from the more functionalist approach of writers situated in a managerial frame. From this view managing diversity is extolled over 'valuing diversity' for its agentic virtues. A variety of nuanced conceptualizations have emerged: parallel with Thomas and Ely's (1996) 'access-and-legitimacy' are Kamp and Hagedorn-Rasmussen (2004) cultural capital argument, and Billing and Sundin's (Chapter 4 in this volume) 'special contribution'.

A more recent usage is *diversity management*, which simply 'emphasizes the value of difference among people in organizations' (Kamp & Hagedorn-Rasmussen, 2004: 535) and avoids some of the hierarchical problems of managing diversity but does not avoid the focus on individuals and the eliminating of power differentials. Critics of the implicit hierarchical power of the term managing diversity view it as the power-holders' continued commitment to continued 'control ... under the guise of liberal affirmation' (Casey, 2002: 143).

*Affirming or valuing diversity* implies the need for ‘mutual respect, collaborative work styles and employee empowerment’ (Better-Reed & Moore, 1992: 47) and is intended to be more ethically and morally driven (Kirby & Harter, 2003). It implies a broad organizational change effort (Mighty, 1991: 67) aimed at egalitarian outcomes with greater equity for minorities and women, as well as organization benefits (Agoos & Burr, 1996). *Tolerating diversity* implies that attempts to value differences between members of different social identity groups have failed or have become too difficult, moving the organizations into one of grudging tolerance.

Following Konrad (2003) we advocate a definition of diversity that emphasizes intergroup interaction and is inclusive of power differences, rather than focusing on individual differences. This means explicitly acknowledging the role played by past discrimination and oppression in producing socially marginalized groups today. Our vision of diversity is therefore not color blind, a theme we take up below.

## THE PROBLEM WITH COLOR BLINDNESS

A recurrent argument raised against multiculturalism and diversity by both Liberals and Conservatives is directed against the supposed tearing of the social fabric that takes place when gender, racial, ethnic, generational, religious and other forms of diversity are recognized and celebrated. The main thread of this critique focuses on the neglect of our shared humanity, arguing that individuals in most modern democracies are equal under the law and have access to a uniform set of rights and privileges. Given both our common humanity and equal status under the law, any emphasis on gender, race, creed, nationality, ethnicity, etc., is believed to be needlessly divisive at a broader cultural level, and ultimately detrimental to the accomplishment of an integrated society (D’Souza, 1995; Lynch, 1997). Such a position is often described as being *color blind*<sup>1</sup>— that is, one that neither notices nor focuses on any kind of biological or socially constructed differences. In essence, color blindness holds onto sameness while ignoring difference (Bacchi, 1990).

Color blindness is invariably presented as a positive attitude – one that is impatient with a range of physical and cultural differences – and is consequently unlikely to result in any kind of protracted discrimination. In other words, a persistent refusal to acknowledge differences is believed to result in a permanently non-discriminatory orientation. While the idea of color blindness is certainly laudable at one level, we should also take note of some of its more problematic features.

First of all, color blindness overlooks the powerful cultural and economic legacy that centuries of exploitation and discrimination leave for historically disadvantaged groups. Entire epochs of slavery, patriarchy and colonialism have resulted in some social identity groups lacking the skills, confidence and institutional support to enter into and advance within work organizations. At the same



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time, they have also left us with a collection of adverse stereotypes toward women, African Americans, gays, etc., that prevent their full inclusion into the workplace. Given this legacy of discrimination, it is somewhat naive to imagine that an attitude of color blindness on its own can overcome systematic social and organizational discrimination. In sum, 'blinding' oneself to race, gender, sexual preference and other socially significant differences cannot, by itself, erase the consequences of many lifetimes of oppression and/or discrimination.

At a philosophical level, the promotion of color blindness has always posed a troublesome paradox for both Liberals and Conservatives. As Goldberg (1993) argues, while liberal philosophy in particular has espoused color blindness and equality for all human beings irrespective of race, sex, ethnicity, etc., it has also been tarnished by statements from leading liberal scholars including Hume, J. S. Mill, Freud, Kohlberg and others who have clearly made pejorative value judgments about the intellect or moral development of women, Blacks, Asians and individuals following non-Christian religions. In other words, liberalism's abstract rhetoric about equality and color blindness is rarely matched by concrete internal discussions regarding women, different nationalities and races.

At the level of everyday organizational practice as well, similar disjunctures are present. While many progressive laws and organizational policies designed to ensure equality and fair treatment at work exist in several multicultural countries such as Australia, New Zealand, Canada, the UK and the United States these laws are often disregarded or even violated in actual organizational situations. Thus, the mere presence of policies and laws does not always end discrimination at work. Hiring committees continue to rely on questionable stereotypes, promotion decisions that subtly discriminate against women and ethnic minorities are routinely made, and many historically disadvantaged groups continue to be ignored, dismissed or disparaged in a multitude of workplaces (Mighty, 1997; Prasad & Mills, 1997). Given these ongoing realities, maintaining a position of color blindness is arguably somewhat pointless and naive.

Additionally, proponents of color blindness posit that not only is difference unimportant, but it can also be problematic on occasion. This overlooks the fact that biological and cultural differences are both a fact of life and a source of pride and identity to many individuals. Biological differences are most obvious in the case of men versus women. Yet, a gender-blind orientation would argue that men and women should be treated identically in the workplace, and would regard maternity benefits as a form of preferential treatment toward women. What they are missing is that the material facts of pregnancy, childbirth and motherhood cannot be equated with fatherhood, and do indeed require a special kind of accommodation from employers.

Other differences have different connotational significance. Belonging to certain ethnic groups might mean that individuals express specific interactional and communicative styles that could be at odds with mainstream organizational cultures (Prasad, 1997). Both men and women from Far Eastern cultures tend to be socialized to be more self-effacing and reserved. Perhaps, as a result, Chinese-Canadian and Chinese-American men are systematically passed over

for managerial promotions on the grounds that they lack initiative and leadership potential (Prasad, 2003). In this case, one brand of ethnic socialization turns out to be a cultural handicap even for talented managers at work. In this and other similar situations, the discourse of color blindness is not helpful in either identifying or dealing with more covert forms of discrimination.

Further, adopting a color-blind attitude fosters a certain amount of denial about the continuation of racism, homophobia and other discriminatory tendencies at work. By assuming that social identities are basically irrelevant, many individuals are also able to ignore the less obvious forms of institutional sexism and racism that pervades organizations in different countries, and on occasion, to even blame women, gays and certain ethnic minorities for their supposed inability to get ahead in the workplace. Worse, as Thomas, Mack and Montigliani (2004) assert, the color-blind approach can provide a shelter for aversive racists and sexists – who make damaging remarks about certain identity groups without necessarily intending to be discriminatory or prejudicial.

In sum, the arguments against a color-blind approach of sameness are indeed compelling, and persuade us in this handbook to eschew such an orientation, focusing instead directly on the unique problems and issues that are relevant to different social identity groups based on gender, race, sexuality, age, class, and so on. This enables us to identify the specific historical circumstances that undergird each group's subsequent encounter with organizations, and examine the institutional barriers they are likely to face at work.

## **THE SALIENCE OF CONTEXT IN WORKPLACE DIVERSITY**

The macro context – history and socio-political influences – directly molds which diversity issues become salient. Crucial aspects of the context for understanding workplace diversity include the history and relative oppressive actions toward different groups, the legislation around access to education, work and health, human rights, the societal placing of diversity groups and the shifts in the salience of issues at different times, caused by the activism internationally and the local level. Understanding diversity issues across countries (and even subcultures) requires the analysis of the social meanings and relative power positions of diversity groups. Within this handbook we have chosen not to present an overview framed by nation (Haq, 2004) as the complexity that results from the interactions of historical factors and specifics of the legal environment within a single volume results in a necessarily descriptive outcome. Nevertheless, relevant illustrations from specific countries are noted throughout this introduction to explicate meaning.

Judgments about 'which diversity group' is more important depends upon the history of the social identity group coupled with the socio-political climate present. It is linked to shifts in relevant legislation (Hunter, 2003) as much as the political activism of the particular group (Prasad, 2001). The salience of issues for

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each group may ascend and 'fall' within specific epochs, for example the ascendance of women's issues during the 1970s, the subsequent fragmentation and 'fall' in the 1990s. This shift in the women's movement has occurred globally, partly due to the strong and valid critique from women in non-dominant ethnic groups (Calas & Smircich, 1996; hooks, 1984). For example, initially in the United States, African American women were most vocally critics of white women, whereas in NZ it was indigenous Maori women. Moreover, a number of Third World women's movements have been sharply critical of a particular genre of liberal Western feminism which makes unreflective assumptions about female oppression in the non-West. In the chapter on postcolonialism, Prasad examines one such issue in detail.

The choice of which diversity issues become salient is also the result of a dynamic interplay in the shifting power positions of societal groups. Increases in the expression and power of conservative groups will inevitably elicit a stronger reaction from liberal and oppressed groups. For example, in the United States the debate on same-sex marriage increased as a diversity issue in conjunction with the increasing power of the conservative political parties and a stronger voice from conservative Christians. The discussion of this issue, in conjunction with local activism, gave salience to sexuality issues internationally (e.g. in Canada and NZ). The societal debate then flowed into the workplace where sexual orientation increased as a salient workplace diversity issue. Thus workplaces and organizations, which constitute them both produce and reproduce societal power relations. As Alvesson and Billing (1997: 108) noted in their discussion of organizations, 'Gender is not simply imported into the workplace; gender itself is constructed in part through work.'

There is a general tendency to avoid contentious issues, especially by politicians crafting the legislation and corporate elites who are responsible for bringing them into the workplace. Hence the societal context may variously mask and highlight workplace diversity issues. This tendency for avoidance can be seen most sharply in times of more conservative political environments. For example, in Australia, the discourse of diversity is primarily about gender, not about the difficult issue of race. The large immigrant populations of the late twentieth century have been substantively assimilated and integrated, no longer the 'new Australians'. Issues between the white majority and the small indigenous population are too contentious to be the focus of substantive diversity scholarship<sup>2</sup> or practice. Significantly, Aboriginal Affairs has been recently folded into the Department of Immigration and Multicultural Affairs (Chapter 21). In NZ, diversity is not currently focused on gender partly because gender is synonymous with women, and women are dominant in the political public landscape, are featured as entrepreneurial success stories and, to a large extent, are no longer popularly viewed as a disadvantaged group in spite of statistical evidence to the contrary (EEOTrust, 2004). The diversity discourse in NZ/Aotearoa is more firmly located in a bicultural discourse centered on ethnicity and race led by Maori struggles for self-determination. Most advances in this struggle have been made through the establishment and sanctioning of separate development in areas of education, health and economic development.

Acts of exclusion are performed by many, if not all, groups. Some groups have deliberately sought space to initially find support and solidarity, 'consciousness-raise' and then take action. As Greene and Kirton (Chapter 20) argue, this strategy of separate development applied to/by women in trade unions has been a successful facilitator of positive change. These spaces of comparative sanctuary provide one of the few times and places where historically disadvantaged groups are able to be freed from 'doing the work of integration' (Higginbotham, 2001) – explaining, translating and maintaining the bridge with the majority.

In the UK (Kirton & Greene, 2005), most of the 'older' European Union (EU) countries, Australia and NZ, unions are key 'social partners' in employment negotiations and the evolution of the workplace environment. In contrast the United States, the originating site of the diversity discourse, is unusual in the context of Western countries where the voices of unions are not prominent. Thus discussions on workplace diversity within the EU is most likely to be embedded within an industrial relations discourse (European Foundation, 2005 [www.eiro.eurofound.ie](http://www.eiro.eurofound.ie)). The most detailed analysis has been on the basis of gender (e.g. participation statistics, gender pay gap, parental leave provisions) while people with disabilities, older people, black and minority ethnic groups are targets of anti-discrimination legislation (European Commission, 2005).

The establishment (and expansion) of the EU has increased the ease of Europeans to move easily across boundaries, yet this increased workforce mobility is simultaneously countered by attitudes of ethnocentrism and a strengthening of nation states. The anticipated benefit of belonging to a strong economic and political bloc like the EU provides crucial incentives for aspirant nations to enact legislative and policy changes to move toward greater equality and fairness of historically disadvantaged groups, often in the face of a historically patriarchal societal structure. However, in actual practice, 'so-called' progressive Northern European countries such as Denmark, the Netherlands and Sweden have turned into sites of marginalization and discrimination toward non-white immigrants. The important influence of the local environment therefore directs and contains the problematization of workplace diversity.

An understanding of diversity issues as context-specific guided us to include several chapters that go beyond the US perspective to cover topics such as unionization, globalization and postcolonial views. Furthermore, while not ignoring traditional quantitative work, we attempted to place at least equal emphasis on qualitative and critical conceptual perspectives, which emphasize the importance of placing knowledge and scholarship within the appropriate historical and societal context.

## **MINIMAL INTERGROUP OR MACRO-HISTORICAL PARADIGM?**

Another problem with divorcing workplace diversity issues from the social and historical context surrounding them is that an understanding of power/dominance

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relations between groups is often lost. A number of conceptual frameworks that have been highly influential in the diversity literature lose sight of status and power differences between identity groups. For example, social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1986) has provided an important conceptual base for the field of workplace diversity scholarship, but it has the potential to divert diversity from the examination of power and inequality due to the predominance of the 'minimal intergroup paradigm' in its research tradition. Social identity theory focuses upon the portion of people's self-concept arising from membership in socially significant groups, known as identity groups. Tajfel and Turner's (1986) original conceptualization of social identity theory suggested that identity group categories have many possible origins, including power differentials between demographic or cultural collectivities. Their early experiments showed, however, that power differentials are not needed for people to categorize themselves into in-groups and out-groups or 'us' and 'them'. All that was needed was the categorization itself. For example, in some of the early experiments, participants were randomly assigned to innocuous categories, such as the 'blue' or 'green' groups, and then asked to conduct various activities. The researchers found that the mere act of categorization resulted in participants engaging in in-group bias and out-group discrimination. This result provided the foundation for the minimal intergroup paradigm, upon which a substantial literature documenting the effects of mere categorization is based.

Considerable work has replicated and honed the early research, demonstrating that mere categorization results in bias favoring the in-group, including enhanced evaluations, more internal attributions for positive behaviors, more external attributions for negative behaviors, and positive discrimination in the distribution of rewards (Brewer & Brown, 1998; Deaux, Reid, Mizrahi & Cotting, 1999; Gagnon & Bourhis, 1996). Scholars have concluded from this substantial body of literature that in-group bias and out-group discrimination are a fundamental dynamic present in all human groups that organizations should be aware of and try to mitigate. One method of mitigating the in-group bias effect is to develop a larger shared goal that serves to focus people's attention on their common/shared identity (Dovidio et al., 2000).

There are at least two problems with the minimal intergroup paradigm for the field of workplace diversity. First, this paradigm implies that all identity groups at all times engage in an in-group bias. This implication has been explicitly examined and critiqued by experimental social psychologists, and meta-analytic findings have demonstrated that members of higher-status groups are more likely to exhibit in-group bias than members of lower-status groups (Mullen, Brown & Smith, 1992). Ironically, low-status groups often favor the higher-status out-group (Hunter et al., 1997; Sachdev & Bourhis, 1987; 1991).

A second problem with the minimal intergroup paradigm is that the impact of in-group bias is the same regardless of the social and historical position of the particular identity group. Given that identity groups are unequally situated such that some have considerably more power and resources at their disposal, in-group bias practiced by highly privileged groups is likely to be considerably more costly

to historically disadvantaged groups than the reverse. This issue is also applicable to other concepts in the social psychological tradition, such as the similarity–attraction paradigm (Byrne, 1971) and the processes of prejudice and stereotyping (Macrae & Bodenhausen, 2000). Historically privileged groups who exclude, stereotype and manifest prejudice against historically disadvantaged groups have a considerably more detrimental material effect on the outcomes of the out-group than vice versa.

Sociologists and critical scholars are more likely to emphasize the importance of situating diversity issues within the social and structural context surrounding them. In this perspective, intergroup biases arise from sources outside the individual, such as historical patterns of resource distribution between groups, although they are expressed through individual cognition and behavior such as differential expectations and differential opportunities to demonstrate competence. Power and privilege are identified as a major source of intergroup biases, and the negative view of the out-group arises because that group is located in a resource-poor structural position within the society. As a result of their location in a disadvantaged social space, members of certain demographic groups come to be viewed by members of the advantaged group as dangerous, untrustworthy, lazy, and/or intellectually or in other ways inferior.

For example, status characteristics theory in sociology argues that the reason certain demographic groups come to be viewed as inferior performers is because members of that group are systematically denied access to the resources necessary for effectiveness, such as education, developmental experiences or advantageous social networks. When members of historically privileged groups work with members of historically disadvantaged groups, the former are likely to perform more effectively, due to these differences in access to resources. Hence, expectations that historically disadvantaged groups will perform poorly are reinforced by experience, and status differences between groups become strengthened, not reduced, with greater contact between groups (Ridgeway, 1991; Webster & Hysom, 1998).

The macro-historical paradigm suggests that the remedy of emphasizing a larger shared goal may be insufficient for overcoming all of the issues arising from intergroup inequalities in society. Hence, bringing different groups together into an organizational culture and then emphasizing that ‘we are all on the same organizational team’ may not mitigate the effects of unequal access to power and resources.

Additionally, an understanding of context creates the possibility of asymmetries in the experiences of historically advantaged and disadvantaged identity groups. Specifically, a particular belief or behavior may have a qualitatively different meaning if it comes from a person in power than if the person is in a position of historical disadvantage. The material implications of beliefs and behavior of powerful and powerless people are asymmetrical as well.

One example of such asymmetries is expressed in Higginbotham’s (2001) concept of African American women doing the ‘work of integration’. The work of integration arises when a historically excluded group becomes included in an organizational setting and is constituted of daily interpersonal struggles to be

heard, valued and accepted by the historically dominant majority. Additionally, these individuals must interact with members of the dominant group in a way that will put them at ease in order to overcome the social discomfort of difference. In contrast, members of the dominant majority are listened to, valued and accepted in the organization. Given that members of the minority find that the work of integration falls on their shoulders, it is not surprising that such individuals find solace in interactions with similar others. Hence, self-segregation among minority groups likely fulfills a fundamentally different function (i.e. stress reduction, restoration, validation in the face of adversity) than it does among historically advantaged groups.

## **GENRES OF WORKPLACE DIVERSITY RESEARCH**

In order to depict the variety of workplace diversity scholarship, we have identified four dimensions along which we categorize several conceptual perspectives. The dimensions are intended to be continuous, but for convenience, we represent them as dichotomies in the Tables. Hence, perspectives sharing the same box in our Figures represent both less and more extreme examples of each genre. Our placement of any given perspective can certainly be debated, but we have attempted to consider the breadth of the field in making these distinctions. Hence, a perspective that might appear to be relatively low on any particular dimension from the perspective of scholars working within a particular genre may appear to be relatively high on that dimension when the full range of genres in workplace diversity research is considered. It is from this broader view that we have categorized the perspectives which follow.

### **The Four Dimensions**

The four dimensions we have chosen to depict the conceptual space for workplace diversity draw from and build upon the work of Burrell and Morgan (1979). We are able to expand the number of dimensions for the field of workplace diversity because we are developing a categorization scheme for a more narrowly defined field, which allows us to elaborate dimensions with greater specificity. The four dimensions we have identified consider whether the perspective:

- 1 takes a positivist or non-positivist epistemological stance,
- 2 has a relatively low or high awareness of power relations between identity groups,
- 3 locates the driving causal forces of diversity dynamics at the individual, interpersonal or macro-structural level of analysis, and
- 4 identifies identities as fluid or fixed.

The positivist/non-positivist dimension is consistent with Burrell and Morgan's work. Positivist genres assume that the researcher *can and should* take an objective stance external to the diversity phenomenon of interest. In positivist genres, *methodological rigor requires* that researcher involvement, either psychological (value-laden conclusions) or material (demand effects), be *ruled out* as a possible explanation for the results of the study. Non-positivist genres assume that the researcher *cannot* be objective and external toward diversity phenomena. Additionally, in non-positivist genres, the involvement of the researchers' personal values to guide the conclusions and even the researchers' personal intervention in the diversity phenomenon of interest is not thought to vitiate scholarly rigor.

The second dimension considers whether a conceptual perspective contains a high or low awareness of power relations between identity groups. By categorizing perspectives along this dimension, we emphasize that many perspectives consider the relative power held by different identity groups to be a key causal factor driving diversity phenomena. We recognize that researchers can and have added the dimension of power relations to some of the positivist perspectives we have labeled as being low in power awareness (see e.g. Stevens & Fiske, 2000). Such work has been valuable for identifying useful moderators and/or qualitative distinctions in the dynamics affecting high- and low-power identity groups. But in cases where the central causal constructs of interest do not include power relations, we consider the conceptual perspective to be low in power awareness.

The third dimension specifies the level of analysis at which the conceptual perspective locates the causal forces driving diversity phenomena. These causal forces have been conceptualized as residing within individuals (micro), interpersonal or group processes (meso), or macro-level social structures. The structural level of analysis potentially includes the organizational level, but in most cases the focus is on the societal level of analysis. The issue of level of analysis is less relevant to non-positivist diversity perspectives because most of them (e.g. feminism, critical race theory, postcolonialism, etc.) tend to constantly move between different levels when considering material situations. Feminism, for instance, always emphasizes local meanings around diversity while simultaneously being cognizant of macro-structural forms of injustice. Similarly, postcolonialism and critical race theory examine how macro-institutional patterns are imprinted in the micro everyday world. Most non-positivist genres therefore tend to emphasize the importance of regularly transcending different levels.

The fourth dimension that we include focuses on the construction of identity. 'Fixed' identity refers primarily to the psychological traditions reminiscent of traits. This does not imply a necessarily essentialist position in the origin of such identity characteristics, for some scholars argue that the identity is modified in adulthood as the result of learning and experience, albeit slowly. The discussion of 'fluid' identity lies firmly within the social constructionist and post-structural discourses. The degree of fluidity can vary from malleability across situations



## INTRODUCTION

TABLE 1.1 *Non-positivist genres in workplace diversity*

Nature of identity	Power awareness	
	Low	High
Fixed	Symbolic interactionism	Feminist perspectives (e.g. psycho-analytic, radical, socialist) Critical race theory Postcolonial theory Institutional theory (e.g. the European tradition)
Fluid	Dramaturgy	Post-structuralism

TABLE 1.2 *Positivist genres in workplace diversity*

Level of analysis	Power awareness	
	Low	High
Individual	Trait theory perspectives Stereotyping Prejudice	Homophobia/heterosexism
Interpersonal	Network theory Similarity–attraction Social identity theory	Subtle, everyday racism Subtle sexism
Macro-structural	Market forces Cultural differences Sociobiology	Institutional theory (e.g. Institutional economics) Status characteristics theory Structuralism

(reminiscent of role changes) to the annihilation of the core concept of identity that is replaced by not only rapidly changing identity constructions but also the simultaneous holding of contradictory and ambiguous ‘selves’. The concept of identity as fluid or fixed is less relevant to positivist diversity perspectives because these perspectives treat identity as relatively fixed. In the positivist view, each individual may hold multiple social identities, and the salience of any given identity is seen as determined by both the individual and the situation. The identities are seen as firmly rooted in the self-concept, however, unlike the social constructionist and post-structuralist perspectives, which view identities as being created and recreated through the process of interaction.

Tables 1.1 and 1.2 give a variety of academic theoretical traditions that may be fruitful when used to interrogate questions within research on workplace diversity.

The depicted perspectives do not include all conceptualizations informing the extant literature, and we invite readers to situate additional perspectives along this same set of dimensions. We find this categorization useful for identifying which conceptual perspectives best fit a particular research question, matching epistemology and methodology, and suggest that scholars utilize it for selecting that combination of perspectives which will best suit their research aims.

## CONCLUSION

One of the benefits of bringing the different genres of workplace diversity research together into a single volume is that scholars are provided with the full array of approaches available to bring to bear on any particular research question. If scholars find that research approaches within familiar genres are overly limiting for achieving particular research aims, awareness of other possibilities may provide alternative avenues of exploration. In other words, we can take our research further when we hit a wall.

In sum, we can strengthen our research. As such, we can live with what we preach to organizations and decision-makers. As a result, we will know more. This understanding will allow us to develop a common language and body of knowledge so that we can better support one another.

Another benefit is raising awareness of the potential limitations of one's preferred genre or genres and to identify useful possibilities for triangulation. Qualitative, non-positivist work might uncover new constructs which might be usefully assessed quantitatively to allow for comparisons across situations as well as generalization through a positivist frame. Positivist work might identify statistical associations that could be elaborated and contextualized with a non-positivist approach.

We also demonstrate openness to a variety of voices and ways of knowing by including a variety of scholarly genres within the same text.

An appreciation for the variety of forms of work in our field will better inform our research, teaching and practice by ensuring that scholars in our field are more effectively educated in the full range of the language of workplace diversity scholarship.

Another benefit of bringing the different genres of work together is to reverse the process of fragmentation occurring in the workplace diversity field. Knowledge of the work that has occurred and is going on around the world will help to prevent needless reinvention of existing constructs. Such knowledge will also minimize the proliferation of multiple labels for the same concepts, or at least allow us to identify the relationships among families of similar concepts.

Being fully educated and aware of each other's work, we will be more able to support each other, perhaps with the result that the field will develop more richly and rapidly. Being able to understand what makes for good scholarship in a variety of genres of workplace diversity research will allow us to review each other's work more expertly in order to identify and support the finest pieces so that they will be more widely read. This process will enhance the visibility and impact of our work.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> We are using the term 'color blind' here also as a synonym for other kinds of social 'blindness' including blindness toward gender, age, ethnicity, religion, etc.

<sup>2</sup> The authors acknowledge the emerging work from the research of doctoral candidates (e.g. Appo, 2004; Foley, 2004).

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