Unpacking Diversity, Grasping Inequality: Rethinking Difference Through Critical Perspectives

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Critical diversity studies emerged in the mid-1990s as a reaction to the re-appropriation of equal opportunities by business through the notion of diversity. They initially took issue with the dominant rhetoric of diversity as a positive, empowering approach valorizing employees' different capacities (e.g. R. Thomas, 1992), arguing that the theoretical shift to diversity would obscure unequal power relations in organizations, e.g. gender, race/ ethnicity, (dis)ability, hampering the ability to challenge them (i.e. Bond and Pyle, 1998; Edelman et al., 2001; Jones et al., 2000; Kelly and Dobbin, 1998; Liff, 1996; Liff and Wajcman, 1996; Linnehand and Konrad, 1999; Lorbiecki and Jack, 2000; Maxwell et al., 2001; McDougall, 1996; Prasad and Mills, 1997; Wilson and Iles, 1999).

Attempting to build alternative understandings of diversity, the critical diversity literature has recently expanded by drawing on a broad variety of critical theories including post-structuralism (Bendl et al., 2008; Jones and Stablein, 2006), discourse analysis (Dick and Cassell, 2002; Siebers, 2009; Zanoni and Janssens, 2004), cultural studies (Mir et al., 2006; Prasad and Mills, 1997), post-colonialism (Prasad, 2006), institutional theory (Boxenbaum, 2006; Cavanaugh, 1997; Zanoni and Janssens, 2008) and labour process theory (Dickens, 1999; Zanoni, 2009; Zanoni and Janssens, 2007). Despite their distinct perspectives, critical approaches to diversity all contest the instrumental view of differences inherent to the diversity paradigm (Hoobler, 2005; Noon, 2007). They share, at the core, a non-positivistic, non-essentialist understanding of diversity—as well as the

socio-demographic identities subsumed under this term—as socially (re)produced in on-going, context-specific processes. Crucially, they underline how such processes and the resulting understandings both reflect existing unequal power relations within a given context and contribute to maintaining, resisting and/or transforming them.
After a decade of critical diversity studies, it is time, we believe, for the critical diversity community to take stock of the new theoretical insights that have emerged and to initiate a conversation on where our work should go from here. The studies included in this special issue can help do both, building as they do on the foundations of critical diversity research yet advancing it further, suggesting new directions. Before engaging in this conversation, we would like to take a step back to trace the roots of critical diversity studies in the critical organizational research on gender and race/ethnicity.

In the Beginning There Were Women and Black People: The Social Production of Inequality in Organizations

Whereas research on diversity is relatively recent, studies of the position of specific socio-demographic groups in organizations date back to the 1970s. Preoccupied to show that organizations are not the meritocracies we like to believe they are, scholars documented how inequality in organizations was structured along gender and racioethnic lines, and investigated the underlying mechanisms that produced it. Within the gender literature, a few women scholars investigated the social mechanisms marginalizing women in the workplace (Cavendish, 1982; Cockburn, 1983, 1985; Kanter, 1977; Ong, 1987). Through organizational ethnography, Rosabeth Moss Kanter showed how gendered roles, relative numbers, network structures and sex-specific reward systems kept women in subordinate professional positions. Cynthia Cockburn analysed how key technical competences were constructed as masculine to exclude women from new professions emerging from technological innovation. Ruth Cavendish examined how class, gender and imperialism shaped the gendered division of labour on the line, while Aihwa Ong examined how modernization affected the lives of Malay women and how they resisted oppression in the new economy. These few significant works contributed to the emergence of the vast literature on gender in organizations (for overviews, see Alvesson and Due Billing, 2009; Calás and Smircich, 2006; Ely and Padavic, 2007; Poggio, 2006) that examines the complexity of gender in organizations from a wide variety of theoretical approaches. In the field of race studies, some early pieces called attention to the silencing of race as an organizational phenomenon and how race operated as an organizing principle (Alderfer et al., 1980; Nkomo, 1992; Omi and Winant, 1986). Alderfer and colleagues (1980) approached race relations in organizations as a multilevel issue of power differences in groups, organizations and societies. Omi and Winant (1986) showed how an ethnicity-based paradigm that emphasized the nature of ethnic identity and the impact of ethnicity on life experiences influenced theories on race in organizations to the point that the core question centred on the lack of assimilation of ethnic minorities in the workplace.

Whereas these early studies drew from a sociological paradigm to better understand how gender and race/ethnicity operated as principles of organizing, later ones mostly drew on a social psychological paradigm to understand the specific constraints faced by women and ethnic/racial minorities in the workplace. Typically, scholars investigated the impact

of race/ethnicity or sex on individual work and career related outcomes such as access to mentoring (Dreher and Cox, 1997; Thomas, 1990) and networks (Cox and Nkomo, 1990; Ibarra, 1995; Mehra et al., 1998), satisfaction (Greenhaus et al., 1990), performance evaluations (Greenhaus et al., 1990; Kraiger and Ford, 1985; Pulakos et al., 1989), promotion opportunities (James, 2000) and income (Dreher and Cox, 1997). They found extensive evidence of unequal treatment of female and black/ethnic minority employees, with negative effects on their work satisfaction and careers (Cox and Nkomo, 1990). These unfavourable outcomes were generally explained in psychological terms, as the effect of prejudice and discrimination. For instance, social identity theories explain discriminating behaviour as resulting from the need of human beings to classify themselves and others into groups to reduce the complexity of the social world and better anticipate social behaviour (Tajfel and Turner, 1986; Turner, 1987). Such classifications are commonly based on traits such as skin colour and sex, which are readily available to perception. Prejudice and bias arise from human beings' need to evaluate their own group more positively than other groups in order to build a positive self-identity (Operario and Fiske, 1998). Other social psychological theories such as homophily and the similarity-attraction paradigm rather explain discriminatory behaviour by positing that individuals tend to interact more frequently and to like others who are similar to them (Lazarsfeld and Merton, 1954; Byrne, 1971).

This later research has, till today, played an important role in documenting persistent inequality along the lines of gender and racioethnicity in the workplace (Nkomo and Stewart, 2006). Through hard data, it makes visible the 'inconvenient truth' of unfairness and discrimination causing vertical segregation and the glass ceiling (Crompton, 1997; Foley et al., 2002; Hultin, 2003; Morrison et al., 1987; Powell and Butterfield, 1994). Yet, the predominance of social psychological approaches has also resulted in a narrow understanding of the processes leading to inequality, namely, one that largely overlooks structural, context-specific elements.

Diversity, the New Business Paradigm for Differences

The term diversity is usually traced back to the mid-1980s, when demographic projections in the *Workforce 2000* Report published by the Hudson Institute (Johnston and Packer, 1987: xiii) showed that by the year 2000 the US labour force would become more heterogeneous, with new entrants comprising significantly greater numbers of women, racial minorities and immigrants than 'native' white men. The report urged policy makers and organizations to address this growing diversity if the US was to maintain its economic dominance in the 21st century. The notion of diversity revolutionized the understanding of differences in organizations, as it portrayed them for the first time in the history of management as strategic assets, which, if well managed, could provide a competitive advantage (Boxenbaum, 2006; Kelly and Dobbin, 1998; Robinson and Dechant, 1997). From a resource-based view of the firm (Richard, 2000), diversity was conceptualized as a set of rare, valuable and difficult to imitate resources. Companies properly managing diversity would attract and retain skilled workers in an increasingly diverse labour market, better service increasingly diverse markets by matching diverse customers with a more diverse workforce, improve organizational learning and creativity through employees' exposure to a wider range of perspectives, and increase organizational flexibility in increasingly turbulent contexts (Amason, 1996; Cox and Blake, 1991; Ely and Thomas,

2001; Kochan et al., 2003). Such understanding opened the way to including, next to gender and race/ ethnicity, a broader variety of identities that could potentially contribute to the bottom line, such as age, sexual orientation, disability, obesity and even functional background, personality, attitudes and value orientation. Diversity served as an umbrella concept under which any individual characteristic could be subsumed, diminishing the risk of inter-group conflict between the majority and minorities.

The business rationale at the core of diversity has often been used to explain the popularity of this notion within the US business world (Edelman et al., 2001) and, later, its diffusion to other western countries (Boxenbaum, 2006; Jones et al., 2000; Süss and Kleiner, 2008; Zanoni and Janssens, 2008). The business rationale also informed much of the academic research on diversity, which focused on understanding the effects of a variety of identities on groups' processes and outcomes (for overviews, see Milliken and Martins, 1996; van Knippenberg and Schippers, 2007; Williams and O'Reilly, 1998). Developing such understanding was considered both by academics and practitioners as the necessary first step to proper diversity management.

For instance, Cox and colleagues (1991) studied the effect of ethnic composition on cooperative and competitive behaviour in groups, while Jehn and colleagues examined how group's informational diversity (education and experience), gender, ethnicity, age and diversity values (differences in perception of the groups' real task, goal, target or mission) affected both group performance and workers' morale and commitment (1999).

Similar to the previously discussed literature on gender and race/ ethnicity, the diversity literature has relied on social psychology theories to investigate the effects of a broad variety of differences on group dynamics (i.e. Barsade et al., 2000; Harrison et al., 2002; Li and Hambrick, 2005; Pelled et al. 1999) and performance (Jehn et al., 1999; Knight et al. 1999; Mohammed and Angell, 2004). Other diversity scholars have rather drawn on an information/decision making perspective to analyse the cognitive processes and outcomes of diverse groups' work. This approach assumes that diverse groups have access to a larger pool of resources—ideas, opinions, perspectives and values—when performing tasks, resulting in a broader range of task-related knowledge, abilities and skills than homogeneous ones. The variety of perspectives containing conflicting viewpoints potentially force the group to thoroughly discuss all relevant information before selecting an alternative, preventing it from choosing a certain alternative too easily, leading to better performance and creative ideas and solutions (e.g. Ancona and Caldwell, 1992; Bantel and Jackson, 1989; Bowers et al., 2000; Cox et al., 1991; Thomas and Ely, 1996; van Knippenberg et al., 2004; Watson et al., 1993). Richard (2000) elevated the study of the effects of diversity from the group level to the organization level drawing upon a resource-based view of the firm that positioned cultural diversity as a source of sustained competitive advantage.

Critical Reflections on Diversity and Diversity Management

The critical diversity literature has developed on the ground of three fundamental points of critique towards the diversity literature and, specifically, the social psychology theories on which it relies. First, a number of scholars have pointed to the problems deriving from a positivistic ontology of identity underlying these studies. Identities are conceptualized as ready-made, fixed, clear-cut, easily measurable categories (Janssens and Zanoni, 2005; Litvin, 1997, 2002; Nkomo and Cox, 1996), ready to be operationalized as the

independent variable to explain the specific phenomenon under study. Such unproblematic approach naturalizes identities into objective entities, rather than acknowledging their socially constructed nature. It reduces individuals to representatives of a social group distinguished by a common socio-demographic trait, the repository of a 'true', essential identity. Furthermore, it has been argued that comparisons are not made *between* groups, but by taking white, heterosexual, western, middle/upper class, abled men as the term of reference, and measuring other groups' difference from this norm. Despite the ambiguity of the term 'diverse', which refers to the heterogeneity in a group, in the comparison, it is actually the other that becomes the object of study and that is discursively constituted as marginal, from the vantage point of a dominant identity (Calás, 1992).

Second, social psychological approaches have often been criticized for their tendency to downplay the role of organizational and societal contexts in shaping the meaning of diversity (Janssens and Zanoni, 2005; Joshi and Roh, 2009; Prasad et al., 2006; Siebers, 2009). In some cases, studies have examined how specific contextual elements, such as the type of task (Bowers et al., 2000; Jehn et al., 1999), task interdependence (Van der Vegt and Janssen, 2003; Wageman, 1995), time (Harrison et al., 2002; Watson et al., 1993) and diversity perspectives (Ely and Thomas, 2001) moderate the relation between diversity and group outcomes such as performance or cooperation and conflict. However, the assumption remains that identities are pre-defined and the focus is rather on which identity becomes salient in the categorization process, neglecting the role of context in shaping the meaning of identities itself.

Finally, a third, related point of critique concerns the inadequate theorization of power. The micro-lens of social psychology leads to an explanation of identity-based power inequality exclusively as the result of individual discriminatory acts originating in universal cognitive processes (Henriques, 1984). Such acts remain disembedded from the greater context of historically determined, structurally unequal access to and distribution of resources between socio-demographic groups (Ely, 1995; Kanter, 1977; Prasad et al., 2006; Siebers, 2009; Thomas and Alderfer, 1989). The diversity literature goes even further than the literature on minorities in that it does not merely neglect power dynamics, but rather takes a clearly managerial perspective—and thus the perspective of the more powerful party in the employment relation—on differences. As the main aim is to better understand the working of diversity in order to manage it properly and leverage it for increased performance, differences are approached instrumentally, as a potential source of value that needs to be activated by virtue of the employment relation (Zanoni and Janssens, 2004).

The extant critical diversity literature has focused on addressing these concerns. A first group of studies analyses the discourses through which specific identities and diversity are constructed in distinct ways by actors in specific social, historical and, more rarely, organizational contexts (i.e. de los Reyes, 2000; Ostendorp and Steyaert, forthcoming; Zanoni and Janssens, 2004). Either focusing the analysis on the textual aspects of discourse or linking discourse to the wider social context from which they emerge (Phillips and Hardy, 2002), these studies show that members of specific socio-demographic groups are defined in essentialist terms, as representatives of a specific socio-demographic group (Litvin, 1997) lacking fundamental work-related skills (or, more rarely, as having additional skills) (Benschop, 2001; Boxenbaum, 2006; de los Reyes, 2000; Janssens and Zanoni, 2005; Ogbonna and Harris, 2006; Zanoni and Janssens, 2004).

A growing body of literature investigates minorities' active engagement with societal and/or organizational discourses of diversity in their own identity work, specifically attempting to construct positive, empowering professional identities (Bell and Nkomo, 2001; Essers and Benschop, 2007; Siebers, 2009; Van Laer and Janssens, 2008; Zanoni and Janssens, 2007). From a similar agent-centred perspective, others have examined how diversity practitioners constantly negotiate the meaning of diversity in their jobs, struggling to balance the business case and equality rationales in order to be heard by key stakeholders, effectively advance equality, and maintain a meaningful professional identity (Ahmed, 2007a, 2007b; Litvin, 2002). Together, these pieces show that discourses, while powerful, never fully determine identity. Individuals neither simply step into 'prepackaged selves' (Alvesson et al., 2008), nor are mechanically put into them by others once and for all. Despite their subordinate positions, subjects continuously engage, as agents, in identity work (Svenningson and Alvesson, 2003; Watson, 2008) to construct, maintain and/or disrupt (multiple) identities favourable to them, challenging inequalities.

Within the gender and ethnicity literature, the identity work of those in positions of power has also increasingly become the object of investigation. Men's identity and masculinities are no longer unmarked within organizations (Collinson and Hearn, 1994; Connell, 1995). Analyses have shown how constructions of work and masculine identities mutually inform each other, conferring status, powers and authority on men in work contexts (Kimmel et al., 2005). As a result, men's powers and authority, social practices and ways of being have been questioned and problematized (Collinson and Hearn, 2006; Martin, 2001). In a similar logic, there is growing interest for the notion of whiteness in organization studies (Grimes, 2001; Leonard, forthcoming; Nkomo, 2009; Walker, 2005). Scholarship on the formation of white identities, ideologies and cultural practices has been a project mainly driven by US scholars inspired by the pioneering work of DuBois (Nkomo, 2009; Twine and Gallager, 2008). In organization studies, two theoretical pieces on whiteness by Grimes (2001) and Nkomo (2009) draw attention to the need to interrogate whiteness and shed light on how whiteness informs both practices within the discipline of organization studies and the language and terminology white scholars commonly use. In an empirical study of how whiteness informed the professional struggles of the white South African Society of Medical Women, Walker (2005) examined the ways white women doctors could gain access to the medical profession during the apartheid thanks to their white race, showing the inextricable link of race to gender identities and patriarchy (see also Frankenberg, 2001).

Yet another promising approach to diversity in organizations draws on intersectionality studies. Today a burgeoning concept (Holvino, 2008; McCall, 2005; Phoenix and Pattynama, 2006), intersectionality was originally developed in black feminist studies to understand the oppression of black women through the simultaneous and dynamic interaction of race and gender (Crenshaw, 1995). Applied to organizations, intersectionality allows connecting multiple work identities to wider societal phenomena, leading to a more fi ne-grained analysis of processes of identity construction and the underlying power relations (Holvino, 2008). Although the importance of intersectionality is widely recognized, relatively few empirical studies have applied this concept to organizations (Adib and Guerrier, 2003; Essers and Benschop, 2007, 2009).

Other critical scholars have re-proposed a critical sociological lens, theorizing how specific socio-demographic identities function as principles along which inequality is structured in organizations. For instance, Essed (1991) developed the concept of everyday

racism that integrates the macro and micro dimensions of racism to account for the processes that incorporate racist notions into the daily practices of organizing. Nkomo (1992) noticed how race could be developed as a productive analytical category when organizations are analysed as sites in which race relations interlock with gender and class relations played out in power struggles. Calás and Smircich (2006) and Alvesson and Due Billing (2009) discussed how gender shapes organizations and organizing, while Acker (2006) proposed the notion of 'inequality regimes' to conceptualize interlocking practices and processes that result in continuing inequalities in all work organizations.

Finally, some journal special issues and volumes have been dedicated to advancing our understanding of diversity and equality within highly heterogeneous demographic, historic, social, institutional and geopolitical contexts (e.g. Calás et al., 2009 forthcoming; Calás et al., 2010 forthcoming; Klarsfeld, forthcoming; Konrad et al., 2006; Metcalfe and Woodhams, 2008) including examples of the specificity of diversity management and its very meaning and practice in several countries across the globe. Many have problematized and challenged the wholesale export of the US-centred conceptualization of diversity and diversity management to other countries. In an early piece, Jones and colleagues (2000) examined how a US 'model of difference' and diversity management did not apply in Aotearoa/New Zealand, a country lacking equal opportunity legislation comparable to that of the US and where the Maori have a specific status as indigenous people. Omanovic (forthcoming) examined the re-interpretation of the notion of diversity within the Swedish socio-historical context characterized by specific conflicting interests, while Risberg and Søderberg (2008) studied diversity management in the Danish cultural context, showing how it significantly differed from the US and British multicultural societies. Drawing from transnational, feminist anti-racism, Mirchandani and Butler (2006) proposed to go beyond the inclusion and equity opposition by reconceptualizing relations of gender, class and race within the ever-present context of globalization. Mir et al. (2006) called attention to the need for theoretical perspectives that examine individuals' embeddedness in local racialized, class-based and gendered hierarchies within the broader process of the globalization of labour and capital.

The Road Ahead: Building Radical, Alternative Projects for Diversity Research

Despite this promising start, much remains to be done to come to grips with the dynamics of power and diversity in organizations operating within a globalized world. Here, we delineate a few promising directions for critical diversity research, and position the studies included in the special issue within them.

First of all, we would like to draw attention to the need for more empirical investigations of diversity in organizational settings. Organizational actors do not simply take over existing grand, hegemonic discourses of diversity but rather selectively appropriate them, and re-combine them with other available discourses to make sense of diversity, their organization, and of their work, and to construct an own professional identity. These discursive micro-analyses are important because they shed light on interstitial, every-day forms of resistance. Unequal power relations can be bent, circumvented, strategically appropriated or countered through language, creating openings not only for alternative meanings but also for micro-emancipatory projects (Alvesson and Willmott, 1992; Prasad and Prasad, 2000; Zanoni and Janssens, 2007). Tomlinson and

Schwabenland's study in this special issue contributes to this literature by showing that the opposition between equal opportunities and diversity management is less clear cut than the critical diversity literature would suggest. Drawing on interviews with managers and diversity experts in the UK voluntary sector, they examine the ambiguity surrounding understandings of diversity management and equal opportunities as well as the complex, heterogeneous underlying rationales for doing 'diversity management' in organizations that have social justice as one of their core values. They also show the dilemmas these organizations face in their double role as equal opportunity employer and as service deliverer whose service quality is controlled by both funding bodies and clients.

A second, related point refers to the need to gain more insight into how diversity is made sense of and experienced by a diverse workforce itself, rather than by (top) managers and policy makers. In particular, too few empirical studies have taken the perspective and reported the experience of individuals belonging to historically disadvantaged groups themselves as well as their 'majority' colleagues. Roggeband and Boogaard's study of the Dutch police force contributes to the diversity literature by analysing how individuals' positions at the intersection of multiple identities situate them within material and discursive inequality structures yet also provide opportunities for their individual agency. The authors specifically contribute to the literature on intersectionality in organizations by showing how individuals' deployment of identities that confer power to them reproduce inequality structures along multiple identities, paradoxically undermining their power in the longer term. Significantly, their data show the business case of diversity can introduce tensions in existing inequality structures, potentially creating more advantageous situations for historically subaltern identity groups, yet that these tensions can sometimes be resolved to their disadvantage. Particularly promising in this study is the effort to link socio-demographic identities to professional ones reflecting the specific productive context of the organization under investigation. Whereas the business rationale at the core of diversity is common knowledge, much less is known about how identities are related to competencies, skills, attitudes in order to include certain individuals and groups and exclude others.

Third, the article by Elaine Swan in this special issue reminds us of the need to study forms of representation of diversity other than written text. This might be particularly challenging, as we are trained to apprehend reality and represent it through words. Yet in contemporary organizations, meaning is conveyed in a multiplicity of forms. The form and appearance of built space, the embodied, social practices that render space an inhabited place, virtual spaces through websites, e-mail, listservs and blogs, posters and promotional material, etc. all shape meaning, including meaning about identities and diversity. The politics behind buildings inaccessible for the disabled and photos of smiling beautiful female students in our universities' advertisements remind us that texts are not necessarily written, and that representations of difference affect different people in different ways (Benschop and Meihuizen, 2002). Swan's article deconstructs the popular diversity image of the mosaic to investigate what it conveys about racial difference. The author argues that this diversity image acknowledges difference while at the same time homogenizing it. Specifically, the inscription of differences into a 'sameness grid' of the mosaic commodities them, defusing minorities' potential political antagonism, operating as a strategy of containment. The article clearly shows how visual imagery is implicated in representational power struggles.

A fourth point of attention is the relation between discourses and the social practices

that produce them and which they, in turn, inform. Whereas discourse analyses have deconstructed the rhetorical mechanisms through which the meaning of identity is constructed in contemporary discourses of diversity, to date, relatively little research has investigated how such discourses are implicated in everyday social practices in work settings. Yet the power of meaning lies precisely in the subtle, pervasive, and ‘naturalized’ way it informs and legitimates every-day, mundane action. In this sense, the diversity literature could benefit from drawing more from gender studies, which have a rich tradition of scholarship on how identity is involved in the micro-processes of organizing (Benschop and Doorewaard, 1998; Gherardi, 1995). In particular, the current ‘practice turn’ in gender studies (Poggio 2006) could help re-conceptualize diversity as an ongoing dynamic social practice, shedding light on the various ways in which individuals, as agents, relate to the structural restraints of multiple organizational inequalities. Analogously to the two-sided dynamic of gendering practices and practicing gender (Martin, 2003), diversity as a social practice could be developed to encompass both the currently available cultural practices to ‘do diversity’, which are now largely taken for granted, and the very act of practicing diversity that is constituted routinely and unreflexively in interaction (Martin, 2006). As pointed out by Pringle et al. (2006), such type of analysis implies methodological approaches that allow for complexity in data collection about diversity, going beyond the textual and preferably including the observation of practices in specific settings.

Victorija Kalonaityte’s article provides a good example of how observational and interview material can be used to understand the relation between social practices and discourse. Drawing from a post-colonial perspective, Kalonaityte examines the simultaneous construction of the majority’s identity as related and opposed to migrant identities within a Swedish municipal school for adults. The use of language and the suppression of migrant religious practices in the organization become symbolic and material tools for subordinating and marginalizing the identity of the other to assert Swedish cultural supremacy. Kalonaityte summarizes the school’s diversity management practices as a form of ‘internal border control’ versus its stated goal of integrating members of ethnic minority groups into the organization. Her research also demonstrates the potential of post-colonial perspectives for surfacing the impossibility of hegemonic consolidation and cultural essentialism. The importance of language and religion as identity markers that she found in her research has been indicated by other empirical studies of diversity in European settings (Ogbonna and Harris, 2007; Siebers, 2009; Zanoni and Janssens, 2004, 2007). This literature alerts us to the need to study those dimensions of diversity that are relevant in a specific national and organizational context—in this case language as a marker of ethnic difference—rather than a priori defined diversity categories (i.e. race).

Finally, we plea for diversity studies that actively search for new, emancipating forms of organizing. To date, most critical diversity research has focused on examining organizational inequalities and showing how existing (diversity) management practices not only do not diminish them (Kalev et al., 2006) but even contribute to their reproduction. We argue that it is time for the critical literature to become more performative, explicitly dealing with stimulating social change. We suggest that, next to formulating critique, this literature move towards ‘reconstructive reflexivity’, an engagement with alternative descriptions, vocabularies and voices to open up new avenues and lines of interpretations that produce ‘better’ research ethically, politically, empirically

and theoretically (Alvesson et al., 2008). From a 'critical performative' stance (Spicer et al., 2009), it would focus on examining and developing practices and interventions reflecting an affirmative, engaged and pragmatic ethos on diversity.

More performative critical diversity studies are, for example, studies that take an agentic perspective to show how the concept of diversity can, despite its managerial core, be strategically deployed by practitioners to achieve forms of social change (Ahmed, 2007a). Or studies that go beyond conceptual debates (i.e. diversity versus equal opportunities, diversity versus gender), examining the processes and practices that give an initiative content and shape, the politics of 'doing', as it is such 'doings' that are key sites for social change (Bacchi and Eveline, 2009). Also, performative studies are those that examine how inclusive organizational environments for minorities can be achieved through a variety of organizational practices beyond classical, HR diversity management initiatives (Janssens and Zanoni, 2007).

Another way to achieve a more performative critical diversity scholarship is to conduct action research. A few diversity scholars have dared to venture into supporting real organizations in their efforts to change racial and gender relations in the workplace and have reflected on such experience. The study by Alderfer and colleagues (1980) mentioned earlier reported the results of an organizational diagnosis carried out in collaboration with management to change race relations in the organization. The authors stressed that the company would draw on the study to implement a 'systemic' action plan. In their evaluation of the transformative potential of gender mainstreaming, Benschop and Verloo (2006) note how action researchers need to make compromises to cope with resistance and lack of commitment to equality goals while compromise irrefutably undermines the transformative potential of gender mainstreaming. In an earlier piece, Ely and Meyerson (2000) evaluate an organizational intervention to increase gender equity in the manufacturing plant and corporate headquarters of a large international manufacturing and retail company. They describe the multiple, insurmountable difficulties they encountered in applying a socialist, post-structuralist understanding of gender to guide a change process, leading to its failure. On a more positive note, in a recent edited volume by Katila, Meriläinen and Tienari (forthcoming), diversity scholars present and reflect on their positive experiences and practices as academics fostering inclusion. From these texts, the numerous challenges and pitfalls of attempting to change reality rather than just studying it become very clear. Yet the incremental and substantial achievements towards inclusion do, too. We propose to learn from the challenges and build on the achievements to advance radical, alternative diversity projects.

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