

# **The Aporia of Diversity Management: Tensions of Control and Proliferation in the Pursuit of Organizational Equality**

## *Abstract* *SCOS Conference 2020: Difference*

*Celina McEwen, University of Technology Sydney (c.mcewen@uts.edu.au)*

*Alison Pullen, Macquarie University, Australia (a.pullen@mq.edu.au)*

*Carl Rhodes, University of Technology Sydney (c.rhodes@uts.edu.au)*

This paper reflects on the reasons that organizations pursue diversity management programs and initiatives. To do so we draw on ethnographic research on relational intersectionality in two Australian organizations that had active diversity management programs with explicit executive support. It is commonplace in diversity research to distinguish between the social justice and business case rationale for diversity in organizations, and both of these were clearly present in the organizations we studied. We also found, however, that in practice the ways in which diversity presents itself experientially was more complex and multifarious in its enactment and efficacy.

To provide a more nuanced view of the different reasons that organizations support and manage diversity, we consider our case organizations in terms of:

- *who* did or did not express care about diversity (e.g. subjective expression of self, position in organisation, sphere of influence, autonomy in position);
- *why* they express this care (e.g. business case, equity, to resist, support, alliances, justice), and
- if and *how* they mobilise their political position practice (e.g. participant, resister, organiser, subject, bystander, policies, events, committee).

This analysis reveals that the practice of diversity management in organizations cannot be subsumed with in a simple dichotomy of motives. Instead, we found that positive change occurs through complex relational practices of difference that are not necessarily pre-organized. The irony this presents is that while the organizations we studied promoted structured and bureaucratic means through which to promote diversity and inequality, the actual practices that made a difference were much more disorganised and entangled. Moreover, they also differed between organizations on account of the different challenges and situations they faced.

In terms of formal organization, the empirical and experiential realities of gender diversity and multiculturalism were managed through hierarchies of difference based on predictable patterns of racial and gendered in/equalities. This ordering of intersectional difference could, in many cases negate difference in that it became fixed and evaded in hierarchies of diversity. Rather than proliferating through a full mobilisation of difference as multiple and relational, difference was rendered 'manageable' by it both being made explicit and measureable. By examining the 'who, why and how' of diversity in practice, however, we were able to see how such a proliferation might be possible once diversity is outside the sole purview of formal managerial practice.

The paper concludes that the effective management of diversity in organizations arises from the keeping diversity's containment and proliferation in tension; what we refer to as the 'aporias of diversity management'. This leads us to suggest that pursuing equality in diverse organisations requires those organizations to formally manage diversity, whilst at the same time not standing in the way of its unmanageable proliferation. Equality, by this account, is not to be achieved on the moral high ground, but in imperfect, embodied, and relational ethico-political relational practices that emerge between people at work.

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