

Equal Opportunity International 2009  
2nd international Conference on  
"Equality, Diversity and Inclusion in Times of Global Crisis"

Call for Submissions

**Diversity as social practice:  
Discussing intersectionality, multi level approaches and organizational learning**

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In this stream we would like to explore the vital integration of three recent discussions on the necessity of contextualizing research on managing diversity on a broader theoretical basis.

*First*, recent conceptualizations of intersectionality are contesting traditional managing diversity approaches focusing on single, stable and predictable social identity categories. They rather assume identities being in flux and highly context specific endeavors (e.g. McCall 2003<sup>i</sup>). This shift in focus from social identity categories to the processes and practices of identity politics and subject positioning sheds light on the historical, cultural and social context, and focuses on the discourses, assumptions and belief systems negotiating what counts as a powerful identity positions in a certain context. While research with a focus on intersectionality has so far focused on the micro-level of doing and undoing identity categories, theories of social practice (for instance, Giddens, Bourdieu or Luhmann) recently tackled the interrelatedness of different levels as structure-agency, field-habitus or organizational decisions by interaction and mediated communication. In a similar vein, discourse analytic research has shown the context relatedness and therefore fluidity of interpretative repertoires as recent research on doing gender in organization strongly emphasized the importance of paradox, shifting interpretations and fluid identity constructions (Nentwich & Kelan, under review<sup>ii</sup>). However, research seriously focusing on more than one level of analysis is scarce.

*Second*, the importance of context is also highly emphasized by multi level approaches in diversity research. Historical, cultural and economic structures as well as discourses are reproducing the management practices on the individual and interactional micro level and vice versa. Organizations, constituted to transform insecurity into certitude (Luhmann 2000: 213), are positioned on the meso-level both adapting to changing contexts and actively shaping their environment. In times of rapid change and crisis, organizations should be able to adapt and thereby eliminate what has become a dysfunctional practice. However, tendencies of structural inertia do foster the illusion of security and stability and are supporting resistance (Hannan/ Freeman 1977). Furthermore, as organizational systems are constructed against anxiety they develop structures and procedures in order to avoid the confrontation with "the other" and other culturally suppressed irritations (Menzies 1960)<sup>iii</sup>.

*Third*, investigating diversity practices from the perspective of intersectionality on different levels of analysis will show ways beyond the management of merely individual identities and emphasize the role of organizations as societal actors. However, this shift in perspective also enhances complexity counteracting the organizational affection for simplifying external heterogeneity. A good example would be 'unity management' as

suggested by Dirk Baecker which avoids complexity and contingency by relating diversity to social demographic categories. Nevertheless, dealing with complexity might be a chance to promote organizational learning. Relating to the entire complexity of diversity management might even enhance the organizational capacity of dealing with external and internal complexity by reflecting mimetic patterns in organizations, which guide observation, decision, communication and strategic action (Sachs/Rühli 2000). A crucial point is the organizational ability to differentiate, reflect, communicate and coordinate individual motives and interests (Lave, Wenger 1991<sup>iv</sup>, Argyris, Schoen 1996). Consequently, organizations may develop change agency and foster organizational learning and societal change according to their ability to include and deal with the complexity of heterogeneity.

We invite empirical, theoretical or methodological contributions applying a multi-level perspective on intersectionalities in organizations. We strongly encourage contributions describing how intersectional multi-level analysis relates to organizational learning. Papers may focus on the following, although not exclusive, aspects:

- Analysis of structure, agency and practice, which are constituting multi level approaches to connect structural elements with interactional and organizational level as analysis of social order (Bourdieu, Giddens),
- Constructivist perspectives of social systems, which relate the challenge of complexity rising to communication and interaction on the level of individuals, organizations and societies (Luhmann)
- Discursive approaches focusing on the interrelatedness of the discursive practices of diversity management on the level of communication and interaction (interpretative repertoires) and the overall discursive formations in managerial and economic discourse (grand discourses).
- Organizational learning approaches which take the interconnectedness of structures, processes and identities into consideration

#### **Track questions:**

- How can we theorize the connection and interrelatedness of different levels in multi-level analysis? How are they conceptualized in theories of social practice (e.g., Bourdieu, Luhmann, Giddens)?
- How can we do "diversity management" on the meso-level of organizations beyond a mere "management of categories"?
- How can organizations resist complexity-reduction through over-simplification?

#### **Stream keywords (maximum 5 words)**

Intersectionality, multi-level approaches, social practice, organizational learning

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<sup>i</sup> Mc Call, Leslie (2003): Managing the Complexity of Intersectionality. <http://www.rci.rutgers.edu/~lmccall/>

<sup>ii</sup> Nentwich, J. C. & Kelan, E. (under review). All said and done? On the understanding of doing gender and its discontents.

<sup>iii</sup> Menziel, Isabel E.P. (1960): A Case-Study in Functioning of Social Systems as a Defence against Anxiety: A Report on a Study of the Nursing Service of a General Hospital, *Human Relations*, 13(2), 95-121

<sup>iv</sup> Lave, J./Wenger, E. (1991) *Situated Learning. Legitimate Peripheral Participation*. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, UK.