## Refugees at Workplace: a new Challenge to Diversity Management in Brazil

Victor de la Paz Richarte Martinez

## 1.      Purpose

In recent years, Brazil has been receiving refugees from various countries, mainly Venezuelans. According to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees Agency (UNHCR, 2019) 33,866 people have applied for recognition of the refugee status in Brazil in 2017. Venezuelans account for more than half of the requests made, with 17,865 requests.

The economic crisis in Venezuela intensified in 2017 has been marked by deaths in protests, misery, and hunger. Thousands of people crossed the Brazilian border arriving in Roraima, a poor Brazilian state. This fact has generated a social crisis by the unexpected conviviality in a   region also suffering from economic hardship and that suddenly received people searching food and employment.

As proposition to reduce this struggle and in order to get better life´s conditions, the Brazilian government sent hundreds of Venezuelans to São Paulo, the Brazilian metropolis considered one of the largest city in the world. On arrival in this city, many of the refugees were received by the Nongovernmental organization (NGO) that took care of them to give food, place to live and offered opportunities to participate in courses for better social adaptation, including the possibility to apply on selective processes of companies interested in hiring them.

One this company is Opera (fictitious name), a French multinational operating in 80 countries with 428,000 employees. The largest employer in the world (Corporate Website, 2019) and has been running in Brazil for 40 years in the segment of facilities management and quality of life with 35,000 employees nowadays. Since 2016, there is a Diversity Project leading with issues as genders, disability people and refugees.

The scope of this study is to analyze - in an exploratory manner - how a Brazilian unit of French multinational enterprise has been leading with a new organizational scenario: the entrance of refugees at the workplace. The design wants to understand the psychological factors that affect the integration of workers seeking asylum in a foreign country and what consequences bring to the organization, to team and teammates, and to the refugees.

## 2.      Design

For the development of this study and due to the refugee in Brazilian workplace is a new issue on Brazilian studies of Diversity Management it was adopted a qualitative approach by interviewing nine professionals from this organization , as can be seen on the table 1 below.

Table 1 . Participants of this study

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | Gender | Age (y.o) | Time in Brazil | Tenure in Opera | Job in the Opera | Social Status | Previous Job in Her/his country |
| 1 | Female | 30-35 | 25 months | 4 months | General Services (cleaning and cooking assistance) | Refugee from Congo | Secretary |
| 2 | Male | 18-20 | 18 months | 5 months | Refugee from Venezuela | Office Assistant |
| 3 | Male | 20-25 | 16 months | 12 months | Painter |
| 4 | Male | 40-45 | 16 months | 4 months | Construction Worker |
| 35-40 | 16 months | 3 months | Fisherman |
| 30-35 | 12 months | 8 months |
|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| 5 | Female | 40-45 | 6 years | 11 years | Coordinator of Diversity Program | Expatriate from Chile | HR executive |
|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| 6 | Female | 25-29 | Born in Brazil | 6 years | Direct Manager | Brazilian Professionals | Student |
| 7 | Male | 35-40 | 3 years | Manager |

The data were gathered by semi-structured individual interviews with six employees and a focus group with three other ones. At this first stage, the data were analyzed by thematic codes as oriented by Bryman (2008) and previous interpretation was conducted under the Critical Psychology perspective (Gough and McFadden, 2001; Fox and Prilleltensky, 1997; Sloan, 2000) to emerge some important factors of social analysis.

Because it is a work in progress, this preliminary data induce some points of discussion in order to develop a scientific article in the future, as it can be seen in the next section.

## 3.      Findings

As a scope of this research is to understand the psychological factors evolved regarding the presence of refugees, this section aims to analyze the data by three levels: organizational, team management and individuals consequences.

**Organizational results**

Using the speech of the coordinator of Diversity’s Management Project the coexistence between Brazilian and refugees employees bring movements to foster innovation in due to different point of view, a more friendly climate by comparison with personal life and the others one with extreme difficulties in previous instances of life. It is important to bring up the “reciprocal” relationship between individuals-organization. To Guillaume *et al.* (2013: 125-126) “Diversity climates allow individuals to embrace their uniqueness and therefore render the organization a more likely target of identification for all its employees. Building on a social exchange or a social logic, the argument is that organizations that are perceived to manage their diversity well engender a sense of obligation on part of the employee who in order to reciprocate engages in behaviors that benefit the organization.”

This research point out the fundamental role of direct management (Wilson, 2013) and the policies of Diversity Management when jointly act to promote the inclusion of minorities in the workplace. The previous guidance gave by Diversity Management on how to deal with different cultural backgrounds and the respectful attitude of leadership (in all levels) perform a force to mobilize the integration of people at the workplace. As a refugee said about her boss: “She has received me with love”.

The previous speech can be analyzed by the idea of benevolent discrimination. Romani, Holck, & Risberg (2018:1) decomposed this concept by three dimensions : (1) well-intendent effort to address actions against discriminations, (2) the social construction of others as inferior and in need of be helped , and as consequence (3) the expectation that this others will be accommodate into the the hierarchical order. What it appears as goodwill can hide a barrier to promote a real inclusion in the workplace with the premise that the other has inferior social position. These actions can perpetuate a structural and subtle form of social innequality.

Direct managers and the coordinator understand that there are more engagement and commitment feelings to the organization from these refugees workers and this incentive a positive emotional contagious to the team. This can be interpreted as a reciprocal answer to an institution that receives these refugees in a difficult stage in their lives. These leaders consider that individual psychological trait as a positive attitude; open mind and engagement represent a kind of glue to their integration inside the group, therefore organizational efforts and leader´s behavior.

**Team management results**

On the another side, according to a manager some resistance can appear with the perception of injustice when the organization make efforts to specific groups like the refugees or apprentice, for instance, and forget the needs and expectations of all employees. Gottfredson (1992) has mention of the risk to understand the diversity management only oriented for social groups, therefore individuals. Diversity practices that focus specifically on improving the outcomes of historically disadvantaged groups cause resentment or backlash on the part of individuals who do not directly benefit from these practices” (Nishii, 2013:1754)

The injustice feeling emerges when some social groups and individual are not listened and assisted according to their needs and by comparison with refugees and younger apprentices. There is then an opportunity to create a channel for listening, for instance, when all employees can express your opinion and their doubts explained. “

**Individual’s side**

Considering the individual level, the social ties is an important factor to seek a job in refugee's situation. Goel and Lang (2019:379) expose that the “immigrants tend to cluster together because the presence of established immigrants facilitates assimilation of new arrivals, both in the labor market and in the social environment of the host country” and this cluster facilitate to immigrants to find their first jobs. This fact was observed on the focus group interview, the three employees were indicated by other Venezuelan who was already working in the Opera Company.

Even though the managers believe in the commitment as response from refugees because they have a job, there is a risk to management. Due to the salary is lower, for three refugees interviewed some personal objective like bring the relatives from Venezuela could be a frustration face the impossibility to save money to reach this aim.

Summarizing, as Schwabenland and Tomlinson (2015) argue that diversity management can hide dilemmas and conflicts in order to be efficient.

## 4.      Research limitations/implications

The interviews were made with workers indicated by Human Resource Area and can hinder some aspects as bias, prejudice and other crucial elements in a Diversity studies. Future research might consider studying refugees with high graduation and that nowadays have been working in a less prestigious job position.

Concerning implications to practioners but with academic point of view too, this preliminary study should address to the discordance about models of diversity management wich the sociological and demographic perspective of difference prevail. To Gottfredson (1992) diversity management should focus on the direct management of people, in other words, the development of people (individual and psychological vision) and not about differentiated groups (demographic and sociological). In this vein, other aim to the future is to comprehend the shift “from a plural organization to an inclusive one is to alter the sociorelational context within wich heterogeneous individuals interact.” (Nishii, 2013:1754)

## 5.      Originality/value of the paper.

Looking up on research bases, there is scarce literature on Refugees in Brazil considering Diversity Management as a mechanism to social inclusion. Additionally, this preliminary work has shown that work can be an instance to support difficult emotional moments in the primary instance of immigration.

## Keywords:

Diversity Management; Refugees, Brazil, Diversity Climate, Inclusion, Refugees in Brazil.

## References

Bryman, A. (2008). Social research methods. 3rd. ed. Oxford University Press. London.

Fox, D.; Prilleltensky, I.. (1997). Critical Psychology: an introduction. Sage. London.

Goel, D., & Lang, K. ( 2019). Social ties and the job search of recent immigrants. ILR Review, pp. 355-381.

Gottfredson, L. S. (1992). Dilemmas in developing diversity programs. In: Jackson, S. E. et al. Diversity in the workplace: human resources initiatives. The Guilford Press.New York.

Gough, B.; McFadden, M.. (2001) Critical Social Psychology: an introduction. Palgrave. Great Britain.

Guillaume, Y. R., Dawson, J. F., Woods, S. A., Sacramento, C., & West, M. (2013). Getting diversity at work to work: what we know and what we still don´t know. Journal of Occupational and Organizational Psychology, pp. 123-141.

Nishii, L. H. (2013). The benefits of climate for inclusion for gender-diverse groups. Academy of Management Journal, pp. 1754-1774.

Romani, L., Holck, L., & Risberg, A. (2018). Benevolent discrimination: explaining how human resources professionals can be blind to the harm of diversity initiatives. Organization, pp. 1-20.

Schwabenland, C., & Tomlinson, F. (2015). Shadows and light: Diversity management as phantasmagoria. Human Relations, pp. 1913-1936.

Sloan, T. (2000). Critical Psychology: voices for change. McMillan Press Great Britain.

United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees Agency (UNHCR). URL: <https://www.unhcr.org/>

Wilson, T. (2013).The human equity advantage. Jossey-Bass. Ontario.