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***Managing Differences Meaningfully through Reflexive Practice***

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**Abstract:**

This paper is based on a post-hoc qualitative reflexive study of a managing diversity project I undertook as Diversity Practitioner and Masters Student. Through this effort, I endeavored to make a contribution to the practitioner managing diversity field by demonstrating that reflexive practice can add significant value to managing diversity processes in organisations. The study suggested that reflexive practice can allow both managers and employees to more critically examine the conventional ways in which differences are apprehended, and that this awareness can enable more embodied approaches to diversity to be developed. Reflexivity thus stimulates both independent and shared action learning sense-making processes which supports equal participation in relation to diversity agendas. By taking a reflexive stance, the limited approaches to organizational diversity, prevalent in the applied field of managing diversity, can thus be challenged and expanded. For example, by positioning organizational diversity as inter-subjective, forged in-the-moment localized embedded processes, meaningful dialogue between employees and managers becomes possible. Moreover, as reflexivity allows for a range of narrative accounts to emerge from such embedded activities, this approach can serve as a model for similar mutualist processes within the wider organisation. The paper will suggest therefore that such democratic managing diversity initiatives open the door to a novel leadership paradigm shift capable of delivering the kind of creativity all organisations require in the competitive global environment because people are placed at the centre of potential for change.

**Key words:** Managing diversity outcomes, reflexivity, action learning, practitioner research, sense-making, storytelling, creativity.

**Introduction**

Much has been written about managing diversity, its benefits, opportunities and challenges. The research project underpinning this paper aimed to make a contribution to the field from a practitioner’s perspective. Thus, designing and operationalizing a managing diversity strategy as an external consultant enabled me, as a researcher, to engage in a post hoc qualitative, reflexive analysis and identify insights from this endeavor. The research ultimately sought to answer the following question: ‘Can reflexivity add value to managing diversity practice’? As such, the study examined in detail after-the-event insights into the complexities that are embedded in organizational change processes, in particular as they relate to hidden barriers to diversity change, and to identify how/if I, as the consultant, influenced the process. As such, I used a qualitative reflexive methodology and analysis framework for this study in order to gain these reflexive understandings, to contribute to future consultancy engagements and to add substance to an industry that is soundly critiqued in academic management literature for its reductionist approaches to organizational issues like managing diversity (Kirton and Greene, 2005, Lewis-Bissett, 1998, Litvin, 2002).

In keeping with the nature of this qualitative reflexive endeavor, it is prudent to provide some background about myself. As a practitioner who has been immersed in cultural diversity dynamics in organizations both professionally and personally over a number of decades, and across three continents. I have developed a deep interest in cross cultural and diversity issues and I am particularly attracted to exploring its dynamics on relationships, organizations and the community at large. It is because of this deep interest that I wanted to systematically reflect on my own practice and the assumptions underpinning my work, hence this reflexive study. Through this study I became increasingly intrigued by the possibilities that reflexivity as practice could potentially bring to managing diversity practice. Therefore, following are my ponderings and perspectives on the notion of reflexivity within the context of research and in managing diversity practice.

**Reflexivity in research and in managing diversity practice:**

The notion of reflexivity in qualitative research is increasingly gaining ground, and in order to establish the connection to Managing Diversity (MD) practice, I will begin by unpacking this notion within the context of qualitative research first. Following this, I will endeavor to establish its relevance as a practice to managing diversity by introducing some pertinent narratives and insights gained from my study as illustrations.

Reflexivity is a strand of qualitative research methodology that focuses on the relationship between the researcher and that which is studied (Brannick and Coghlan, 2006). In particular, it aims to expose how relationships and interpretations of meaning and the actions that follow are formed in relation to the conduct of research. These factors are interrogated by the researcher engaging in a systematic process of reflection in relation to all aspects of their endeavor. As such, reflexivity provides an action framework for critical interrogation and analysis of these reflections in relation to taken for granted practices and underpinning assumptions. For example, Cunliffe (2003: 988) describes radical reflexivity as a two-phased constructionist and deconstructionist activity. She describes both as an activity of looking back, but each with a different focus. Constructionist activity focuses on the ways of being, enacting and how one makes sense of, and experiences the world. The deconstructionist activity, in contrast, places this experience within specifically adopted theoretical frameworks which allow the character of what is known and how it came to be known to be identified in more rigorous ways. Hence a reflective element is introduced to qualitative research which both acknowledges and systematically manages the inter-subjective aspects of the research.

Alvesson and Skoldberg (2005: 5) name the characteristics of reflexive research as comprised of careful interpretation and reflection, noting that as pre-formed theoretical assumptions, language and understandings determine the nature of interpretations in the research context, therefore critical interrogation of these influences is called for. Given the presence of these highly interpretive aspects of research, the notion that reality is a static construction waiting to be found, ‘out there’, and claimed as ‘reality’, as positivists suggest, is rejected by qualitative researchers. As such, Alvesson and Skoldberg (2005: 5) describe the second bases of reflection as method, as ‘turning inwards toward the person of the researcher and the form of presentation in the research context’ in order to learn to critically interrogate one’s own way of constructing information and meaning along with others.

Likewise, Holliday (2007) also describes reflexivity as a complex area in qualitative research which focuses on relations between the researcher and participants in relation to the research setting, which responds to the realization that researchers and their research methods are entangled with the politics of the social world they study. He also endorses reflexivity as a way to address this entanglement as ‘the way in which researchers come to terms with and indeed capitalize on the complexities of their presence within the research setting, in a methodical way’ (Holliday, 2007: 138). Here he is not just acknowledging the presence of subjectivity but suggesting that awareness of the identity of the researcher can bring strengths to the research process. This contrasts markedly with a positivist approach to research which attempts to control and/or eliminate subjectivity through the adoption of mechanistic tools. Holliday also identifies the contextual aspects of reflexivity that Alvesson & Skoldberg (2005), Cunliffe (2003) and Cherry (1998) refer to, by comparing it to an anthropological approach to learning culture, and describes the management of the complex relationships involved as ‘a relationship of dealing’ (Holliday, 2007: 140).

Furthermore, Holliday describes the research process as comprised of a set of interactions taking place between the perspective of the researcher and the culture of the research setting whose influences have a direct bearing on the way the research process is perceived. This relationship creates a ‘culture of dealing’ influenced by four specific dimensions and processes (1) ‘background cultural differences’, (2) ‘projecting and othering’, (3) ‘inter-competence’ and (4) ‘discourse politics’ (Holliday, 2007: 140). The concept of background cultural differences is self-explanatory as reflecting the influences each participant brings to the research relationship. Projecting and othering represents how each participant sees the other, what pre-conceived notions they invoke and how these in turn influence future interactions. The dimension of inter-competence reflects the relative status and power ascribed within the relationship between the researcher and the participants in the research setting thus Holliday’s term ‘the culture of dealing’. The latter also influences perceptions about each other’s cultural background and relative status and thus influences how we respond in terms of ‘projecting’ and ‘othering’.

The examination of the ‘discourse politics’ dimension is particularly important in reflexive research according to Holliday, because the use and choice of what he describes as ‘highly technologized’ researcher discourse; the language and texts chosen by the researcher to approach and negotiate the research project can put participants at a disadvantage. He discusses the power of the researchers’ professional discourse in the ‘culture of dealing’ as having the potential to stand in the way of the development of meaningful relationships between the researcher and participants. Here he is signifying that unlike in positivist research, in reflexive research the engagement of the researcher in the environment and the relationships and empathy created is likely to lead to rich and meaningful information. Hence, he proposes that researchers liberate themselves from professional discourse, take on roles that are meaningful to the culture entered into and establish relationships with the people in the research setting on their own terms (Holliday, 2007).

A third discourse around reflexivity is introduced by Hosking and Pluut (2010). They suggest that current discussions about reflexivity represent two specific discourses; a discourse around minimizing bias and a discourse around making bias visible (Hosking and Pluut, 2010: 64). As such, they suggest a third discourse around reflexivity; that of a discourse of ‘ongoing dialoguing’, which within a relational constructionist framework suggests that research is a process whereby ‘the identities of researcher, research object and related realities are in ongoing re-construction’ (ibid: 67). As such, participants engage in a relational process of dialoguing and also turn back on the construction of the inquiry in order to unsettle prevailing and dominant ways of knowing and being that operate within these processes. Through this ongoing continuous dynamic, multiple ways of knowing and being emerge and are given credibility by the participants involved, and thus power relations can be explored and identified as they relate to the knowledge and identities being constructed. The third discourse of reflexivity closely mirrors the ‘action-reflection-action’ action learning cycle proposed by Cherry (1998), and the ‘relationships of dealing’ as suggested by Holliday (2007). However, it also makes and additional contribution by suggesting that these processes, in addition to being reflexive in the sense of looking back, are also ongoing processes of re-constructing local realities and identities and thus enable the opening up of spaces to link to broader notions of being and learning.

It is here where I can begin to transition reflexivity in research to reflexive practice in managing diversity; and I will begin by briefly introducing the managing diversity concept.

**Managing Diversity**

For the last few decades, the notion of ‘Managing Diversity’ (MD) has been a key management approach claimed to be capable of harnessing the skills, knowledge and abilities of diverse employees within organisations to create competitive advantage (Harris and Moran, 1991, Hayles and Mendez-Russel, 1997, Kirton and Greene, 2005). Representing an instrumental based managerialist approach, diversity, from this perspective, is portrayed as comprised of characteristics of individuals and, in relation to the workforce, as needing to be discovered, identified, categorized, controlled and managed (Benschop, 2001, Bissett, 2004). MD initiatives therefore have largely assumed it is possible to do just that. In addition, the ‘doing’ of MD has been relegated to the domain of middle managers operating on specific organizational directives issued by senior management. These policy agendas tend to result from senior management reactions to pervasive case study narratives promoted by diversity consultants regarding how successful diversity management can be in terms of gaining new markets and achieving higher workforce productivity output. Herein lay the shortcomings of the MD initiative, in that it is positioned as something that needs *doing* through controlled mechanisms and operationalized in narrow managerialist terms. Workplace diversity thus, is framed as a problem that needs to be controlled (managed) and accordingly designated as a job for managers only; reinforcing the tradition of command and control top-down management processes. An additional problem is that MD applications are invariably lumped into an already overflowing basket of *things to do* for middle managers and hence likely to only receive attention when diversity is considered to have an adverse effect on productivity and other associated bottom-line objectives. Overall, in terms of fundamental underlying assumptions, MD programs reflect a positivist, objectivist mindset with hierarchically driven rationalizations being taken for granted. This means MD practices tend to be merely (i) paid lip-service to; (ii) are narrowly focused on ensuring compliance with governmental bodies of legislation; (iii) reflect programs imposed on people; and, (iv) are rarely modeled by senior managers and executives via sensitized actions and in terms of representation of marginalised identity groups.

As a consultant focusing primarily on cultural diversity practice in organisations, in my work I too have used this approach and thus been guilty of serving as an instrument myself for the imposition of questionable practices on others. In addition, I have also observed and experienced the ad-hoc, stop-start; bolted-on approach to doing diversity that is so prevalent in organisations today. Is it any wonder then that after all this time, and all the work that has been done, many organisations continue to look at workforce diversity as something problematic and something that an organisation *has* (a tool to manipulate), rather than something that *is* (i.e., an embedded social and political phenomenon).

It is this fundamental difference in *perceiving* organizational diversity that enables the repositioning of the *doing* of diversity as a dynamic action-reflection-action developmental process that happens in the moment and includes all employees, and that is inclusive of all aspects of diversity that matter to the participants involved, not just those mandated by or sanctioned through organizational directives.

Reflexivity then becomes a key practice in this action learning processes, where both managers and employees collaboratively deconstruct, critically reflect on and reconstruct the environments and relationships conducive for achieving mutualist objectives. As this creative dynamic process is located within, informed by, and relevant to the context in which it takes place, it enables sense-making of and considering all aspects of diversity in an organization. Moreover, it enables those aspects of diversity that constitute the identities of the particular employees working within the particular context to be brought to the table in more meaningful ways. This then enables a focus on the employees, their workplace, their workplace relationships as well as organizational objectives, thus enabling a more mutualist agenda. As such, the potential for inclusion of and dialogue around all aspects of diversity that matter and within a particular workplace context is opened up.

Following is a brief illustration of how the narratives of and insights I gained from the study thus enabled me to draw the above conclusions. To provide context, I will provide a brief overview of the organization and the consultancy project in the study and I will interweave this overview with insights derived from the study as clarifications and illustrations.

**The organization, the consultancy project and findings of the study**

The organization in the study is a regional division of an Australia wide company concerned with the distribution of goods and the provision of retail services. Historically, the organization was until the latter part of the 20th century an employer of men, where at the time of the study gender ratios represented a 70/30 male/female split in the organization which was mirrored in the regional division. Most female employees occupied positions in retail, administration and support. Anecdotal information, my experience of its bureaucratic approval processes and systems and strict delineation between business units, led me to perceive the organization as hierarchical, bureaucratic, male dominated and representative of its industry. However, the organization was aware of this and it had recognized that in order for it to remain a player in what it perceived to be an increasingly competitive and demanding market, it needed to adopt a much more enterprise focused approach. Although this awareness and desire for change was reflected in its corporate and business plans, it was not necessarily reflected in its practices.

The Consultancy project was initially conceived in response to the need for regional human resources staff to be able to deliver on corporate diversity objectives and targets. After initial discussions and engagements with these staffs, it became clear that in addition to issues regarding meeting objectives, there was disconnect with the organizational discourse on diversity, the way it was understood by the regional human resources staff, and the way in which they were to deliver on specific objectives. As such, the consultancy project revolved around meeting three specific needs; (1) the need for regional human resources staff to be able to interpret and effectively communicate organizational diversity directives to all staff, and (2) roll out diversity initiatives that would engage employees around these objectives within their own regional context, and (3) enable human resources staff to be able to meet diversity targets.

The diversity discourse of this organization revolved largely around a specific organization wide ‘People Management Strategy’, of which a Diversity Strategy and a Code of Ethics were key component. As such, organizational diversity initiatives revolved around (1) recruitment and retention, (2) flexible employment conditions, (3) reflecting local demographics in its workforce, (4) culturally sensitive customer service, (5) improved people management to achieve competitive advantage, (6) realizing diversity potential, and, (7) ensuring compliance with Equal Employment Opportunity legislation.

Based on the three broad needs stated earlier, the consultancy project thus required to provide means for operationalizing the broad organizational diversity directives in practical ways that would make sense within the context of the regional division and its workplaces, and to provide a means to overcome workplace based issues. The latter proved to become a major driver for the consultancy project and it resulted in the development and implementation of a Program that enabled managers and employees to engage in dialogue around key aspects contained within the Code of Ethics. As such, the aim of this Program was to make diversity discussable and engage employees in the development of localized solutions to diversity issues which would potentially also lead to the development of more harmonious workplace based relationships.

However, bureaucratic hierarchical forms of organizing such as those present within this organization do not cater well for this type of Program, and in particular not as it relates to employees at the lower levels of an organisation who tend to be the very group most likely to be affected by diversity issues (Shapiro, 2000). The Program responded to organizational diversity directives in so far that these demanded that managers adopt more people orientated approaches that embody the executive’s organizational diversity management objectives. In addition, the Program also provided a means for managers to shift towards a more enterprising approach in their particular workplaces (Salaman, 2001, Marchington, 2001). However, the organization’s hierarchical organizational form, discourse and existing hegemonic forces continued to disempower managers willing to show initiative and pay attention to the human dimensions in the workplace. This became evident in how managers perceived and worked with the Program in different ways in the study. For example, at one worksite the manager saw the program as an opportunity to develop more meaningful relationships and include employees in making decisions about workplace based issues that affected them, in more meaningful ways. At another worksite, however, the manager perceived the program as too risky within the existing organizational hegemony and decided to go through the motions and leave early on during the implementation.

Although employees at the lower echelons of the organization were kept duly informed about, and were generally aware of the organizational diversity directives, by means of bulletin boards and top down verbal communication, they were not included in the shaping of directives, nor were they consulted in meaningful ways about how these directives were to take shape. As such, most employees perceived these directives with suspicion and harbored distinct feelings of disconnect and marginalization. This lack of engagement with the organization also resulted frequently in a lack of willingness to invest and expend discretionary effort (Vernon, 2005, Pollit, 2008, Woodruffe, 2006). Even though there were mechanisms (daily team briefs) in place in the lower echelons of the organisation that could have been used to enable more meaningful engagement in the organizational diversity discourse and participation and discussion of its desired outcomes, these mechanisms were used primarily for one-way top-down communication purposes. This prevented the development of the meaningful mutually beneficial relationships that are required between workers and managers to enable effective participation and for discussion and dialogue around managing diversity objectives and other human dimensions in the workplace to take place.

As a diversity practioner, I had learned early on in my career that in order to maximize a diversity initiatives’ potential, it is imperative to operationalize any type of diversity initiative by transforming already well established organizational practices, rather than establishing new ones. As such, the timeframes used for the earlier mentioned top down communication mechanisms were redeployed as means to provide space and time for more meaningful dialogue, rather than for top down, one way communication.

Therefore, the Program was designed to be used by managers and team leaders to engage with employees in dialogue about organizational objectives around diversity. As such, the worksites were provided with a resource developed specifically for this purpose. The resource provided managers and team leaders with tools in the form of cartoons and short narratives which were linked to themes derived from the organizational Code of Ethics, and based on incidents that had taken place somewhere in the organization. In addition, it provided managers and team leaders with a process and ongoing support during the role-out of the Program. Through the existing daily team briefs these cartoons and narratives enabled managers to introduce and stimulate dialogue with employees around workplace issues which could then also be linked to the wider organizational diversity agenda. As such, the program provided resources, a means and a process by which mutual understandings between managers and employees on diversity could be fostered. Managers and employees could focus in particular on their own perspectives on issues and points of view and as they related to their own places of work and their workplace relationships, rather than on meeting organizational objectives only.

Informed by the combined work of Cunliffe (2003), Czarniawska (1999), Holliday (2007) and Alvesson and Skoldberg (2005), in the study, I was able to critically interrogate my own constructs of information. I thus retold the stories of the consultancy project through a secondary review of the materials that were created. By then critically reflecting on these stories, I was able to develop further understandings and insights into the relationships I encountered and the possibilities for mutualist organizational change. It is through this process that I began to understand the potential of reflexive practice for Managing Diversity.

For example, I realized that in addition to the opportunity for managers and employees to engage in focused reflexive discussions around the cartoons and narratives, it also created the space for potential dialogue and reflection around wider workplace dynamics. For example, in the workplaces described in the study, employees and managers also established parameters around what they believed to be desirable and undesirable behaviors in the workplace and agreed to strategies for communication when behaviours in the workplace challenged these parameters. Thus, the process enabled a mutualist perspective around workplace based relationships *and* new narratives around the organization and its diversity directives to emerge.

Whilst engaging in these dialogues managers and employees engaged in an action learning process and collectively deconstructed and reconstructed their perspectives on what construed a productive and inclusive workplace. They actively engaged in creating the type of workplace they wanted and established relational parameters whilst also taking into consideration the objectives of the organization. Therefore, rather than the manager needing to ‘manage diversity’, it became a mutualist relational process, reinforced by narratives around relational ways of being in the workplace which were based on shared understandings of the dynamics of diversity in the workplace, and not just on organizational diversity directives.

As such, in addition to answering the research question, the study also provided a preliminary example of how reflexive practice enables differences to be managed more meaningfully. My more reflexive practice as a cultural diversity consultant and my PhD studies are providing me with a means to reflect on and explore this further. It is interesting to note that at the workplace where the manager left early in the program, the new manager was motivated to participate and I was thus able to also reflect on how organizational hegemonic forces influence middle management decision-making (Sims, 2003). It is here where a parallel could also be drawn in reflexivity in research and in diversity practice. A parallel between the researcher freeing themselves from researcher discourse, as suggested by Holliday (Holliday, 2007), and a manager freeing themselves from the prevailing organizational diversity discourse so that relationships that will further more mutualist approaches to diversity in organization can emerge. As there was a difference between managers and their perceived ability to participate in the program, this raises interesting questions about the influence of organizational hegemony and power on what is perceived as possible.

The managers who perceived the Program to provide them with an alternative approach to problem solve in the workplace seized the opportunity.

Although the Program was based on organizational diversity directives, it provided a new ‘hook’ and a process for managers and employees to reflexively discuss and unpack their own narratives and interpretations about workplace based dynamics. As such, individual and organizational interpretations and assumptions embedded within the organizational diversity directives as well as in the workplace were explored, unpacked and discussed. Thus opportunity was created for the perspectives of the organizational diversity discourse as perceived and experienced by the employees to surface and to be considered. For example, in one of the work sites employees had perceived the Code of Ethics as a disciplinary tool. By engaging in the dialogue process over time, employees began to see the Code of Ethics more as a framework for discussion and to guide dialogue about parameters for workplace based relationships. In addition, at another workplace employees began to see the job of the manager through different eyes and became more empathetic when employee actions inadvertently affected the manager. Also, the process of collectively gaining these insights impacted significantly and in positive ways on team development at these sites. Employees began to increasingly take responsibility for their own actions and considered the impact these had on others. As such, in addition to improved morale and workplace atmosphere, this resulted also in very tangible business results such as reduced absenteeism and increased productivity. The Program stimulated and enabled employees and managers to engage in independent and shared action learning sense-making about perspectives and unpack assumptions that operated within their particular workplaces. However, the Program also raises issues around the work required to embed this type of approach into an organization, in order to avoid it becoming another stop-start, bolted on diversity intervention.

A more mutualist approach to exploring diversity as something naturally occurring, and as a relational process that takes place within an organization also raises questions for leadership. These questions would revolve around the effectiveness and the impact of prevailing heroic notions of leadership on the day to day relational activities that take place in organizations. Within the context of managing diversity practice, could more relational approaches also facilitate more relationally centres leaderful practices to emerge? Thus, my reflections in this study have also opened the door for a potential leadership paradigm shift, which I am also exploring further as part of my Doctoral studies.

**Conclusion**

I believe that a key ingredient in managing diversity organizational change initiatives is the development of mutually beneficial relationships. As such, I was able to use the stories of the consultancy project as illustrations of what is possible in an organisation when a focus on relationship is nurtured. As such, through this reflexive process, I was able to identify three critical elements required for such initiatives: (1) cultural consciousness (Ascalon et al., 2008, Thomas et al., 2008); (2) participation and dialogue to enable shared sense-making (Parry and Hansen, 2007, Sandberg and Targama, 2007, Pye, 2005).; and, (3) shared meaning, understanding and objectives (Macey and Schneider, 2008, Kirton and Greene, 2005, Litvin, 2002, Vernon, 2005).

I have since evolved my own practice as a diversity practitioner and work much more reflexively. In addition, I have since developed an approach to cultural diversity practice that emerged in part from what I learned from this study. As a practitioner I continue to search for ways to enable people in organizations to engage in ways around diversity that are meaningful to them. As a researcher and a PhD candidate I am now in the process of expanding my current approach into a potential framework for Diversity Praxis. With this I aim to make a case for the displacement of traditional diversity management in favor of more relationally focused approaches that consider identity work and identity regulation in organizations as central to such processes, and explore the potentials for relational leadership.

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