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A relational framework for international transfer of diversity management practices

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The aim of this paper is to propose that a relational framework, which is underpinned by a contextual and multilevel conceptualisation of diversity management, can help international transfer of diversity management policies and practices. We argue that the mainstream single-level conceptualisations of diversity management within the territory of legal or organisational policy fail to capture the relational interplay of structural- and agentic-level concerns of equality. Consequently, individual choices, organisational processes, and structural conditions – all of which collectively account for unrelenting power disparity and disadvantage within social and employment contexts – remain generally under explored. The paper proposes a relational framework that bridges the divide between macro-national, meso-organisational and micro-individual levels of analyses to arrive at a more comprehensive, realistic and context-specific framing of diversity management, which can overcome the difficulties of international transfer.

Keywords: context; diversity management; equal employment opportunity; intersectionality; relational perspective

Introduction

The concept of 'diversity management' originated in the US and has been widely adopted in the industrialised countries of the West including the UK, Canada and Australia (Agocs and Burr 1996; Jain and Verma 1996; Teicher and Spearitt 1996; Liff 1997). The concept is shaped by the demographic, socio-cultural and economic realities in the US and other Western contexts. However, there are concerns that a US-centric approach may not hold well for diversity management in other national contexts due to differences in socio-economic conditions, national legislation, culture, demography, history – plus a host of other factors (Jones, Pringle and Shepherd 2000; Syed 2008a). In addition, there are concerns regarding the theoretical rationale, and the practical outcomes of the extant approaches to diversity. For example, in their recent review of the diversity literature, Syed and Kramar (2009) critique the 'narrow capitalistic emphasis' on the business benefits case of diversity management which, despite its impressive rhetoric, has been unable to achieve equitable employment outcomes for diverse employees.

Similarly, in his recent article on 'the fatal flaws of diversity', Noon (2007) argues that diversity is 'essentially a concept that marginalises the importance of equality and suppresses the significance of ethnicity in the workplace' (p. 780). Although we do not necessarily agree that diversity may inevitably prove fatal to equality, we do, however, recognise that the concept must be refined in order to improve its efficacy – not only in

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countries where it originated but also in an international context. This paper argues that effective diversity management is most likely to be realised in contexts in which there is multilevel structural and institutional support for the inclusion and participation of all individuals and groups (e.g. Kalev, Dobbin and Kelly 2006; Johns 2006).

Empirical studies undertaken in the US, UK and other industrialised countries have confirmed that despite a plethora of equal opportunity laws and organisational initiatives, ethnic minorities, women and other historically discriminated-against groups continue to remain disadvantaged and disempowered in organisations relative to their white male counterparts (e.g. Bendick 1995; Junankar, Paul and Yasmeen 2004; EOC 2007). For example, in the UK, women's participation in managerial and professional jobs has shown only minimal increase from 34% in 1986 to 36% in 2002. In the US, the black–white female wage gap increased from 6% to 18% between 1980 and 2002, despite the improved economic conditions of the 1990s (Dozier 2006). Previous research suggests that issues of diversity and discrimination, such as those related to ethnic minorities' integration and social cohesion, are complex, shaped as they are by a range of historical, political and socio-economic structures (Cheong, Edwards, Goulbourne and Solomos 2007; Syed 2008b). The macro context, i.e. the socio-political factors, legal framework, demography and history, inevitably determines which forms of social identity become salient in both society and the workplace (Prasad, Pringle and Konrad 2006). In other words, the issues of diversity and discrimination that proliferate in the workplace have their genesis in the above macro-contextual determinants.

This paper argues that the given single-level conceptualisations of diversity management within the territory of legal or organisational policy fail to capture the relational interplay of structural- and agentic-level concerns of equality (Syed 2008b). Departing from single-level conceptualisations, the paper proposes a relational framework that takes into consideration multilevel factors when developing a context-specific approach to diversity management. At the macro-national level, the relational framework takes into account the significance of national structures and institutions, e.g. laws, social organisation, religious strictures, and gender and race relations. At the meso-organisational level, we consider the organisational processes, rituals and routinised behaviours at work that establish the rules of meso-level gender and race relations. The absence of egalitarian traditions at work means that meso-level relationships may reflect a hierarchical organisation of discriminatory practices, embedded within the broader social relations. At the micro-individual level, we consider issues related to individual power, motivation, and agency to affect change, all of which are gendered and racialised phenomena.

The paper is divided into three sections. The first section explains the rationale for adopting a relational approach to diversity management. Here we highlight the relational approach's ability to contextualise diversity according to local multilevel factors and its ability to bridge the customary divide between the subjective and objective concerns of equality. In the second section, the paper describes three key components of the relational approach: the macro-national, meso-organisational, and micro-individual levels of analyses. The third section provides a schematic representation of the proposed relational framework and discusses some implications for researchers and policy makers.

Why a relational approach?

The promulgation of international research in the field has laid bare the limitations of the original conceptualisations and measures of diversity management that were either

developed in a single country or characterised by mono-cultural dominance in the workplace (Nishii and Özbilgin 2007). It is a fact that in much of the literature, diversity remains a concept abstract and isolated from the multilevel factors responsible for individual and group differences in the workplace. For example, power relations within a specific society remain generally invisible. Important questions, such as whose interests the prevailing diversity discourse serves, remain largely unanswered (Sinclair 2000, p. 240). In this section, we explain how a relational approach may offer a context-specific alternative to the single-level studies which tend to be a feature of the ethnocentric and purist traditions of research. We will also explain the ability of the relational approach to take into account the multi-layered context responsible for the inequalities and power differences that infiltrate the workplace.

Recent years have seen the emergence of dissonant views from contexts outside the mainstream geographies of diversity research (Africa, Asia and South America, for example), views which have highlighted the significantly different roles that race, religion and ideology have played in shaping diversity and equal opportunity. For example, Syed (2008a) argues that the concept of equal opportunity and diversity is generally indigenous to Anglo-Western contexts and for this reason its transportation to Muslim majority countries must be customised according to local socio-cultural contexts. A non-local discourse on diversity management faces the traditional challenges of local non-compatibility (Jones et al. 2000). Based on the history and origins of management research, the extant management knowledge is far from global. In particular, it is lacking in the developing economies of South America and Asia (Tsui 2004, pp. 508–509). It is, therefore, important to 'situate' the multilevel discourse of diversity management and its enactment within the unique context of each society.

Proposition 1: Diversity management practices are shaped by the history of the local context.

Previous research has emphasised the significance of social cohesion of a diverse population for diversity management in the workplace. For example, based on their study of migration and multicultural policies in the UK, Cheong and colleagues (2007) highlight the need for a critical framework for assessing the relationship between social cohesion and diversity management. The authors demonstrate the ways in which the discourse of diversity is socially constructed and value-based, depending on the prevailing ideological climate. One related consideration, which aims to achieve social cohesion within the workplace, is to treat social capital as a public policy tool. However, an aim such as this is hard to achieve without first developing a model of diversity management, a model rooted in a textured understanding of diversity processes and contexts. Research suggests that the existing emphasis on the discursive context of policy formulation perpetuates an unacknowledged misconception concerning the asociality of those involved in policy making, whereby their principal role is perceived as the maintenance of the status quo (Hunter 2003). Scholars have highlighted the manipulative use of diversity policies. Bertone and Leahy (2003), for example, expose the exploitative nature of Australia's cultural diversity policy, which casts ethnic minority members as 'others' who must pay for 'the luxury of' citizenship by yielding cultural dividends to their employers. Accordingly, it may be argued that social cohesion and equity in the workplace will be difficult to realise unless a fair and non-exploitative mechanism of social cohesion and equity is in place at the social policy level.

There is ample evidence of how a specific social policy context influences the formulation and implementation of diversity policies in organisations. In her study of

gender, work and equal opportunities in the post-communist countries of Central Eastern Europe, Pollert (2003) observes that the prospects for equal opportunities at work need to be contextualised in a wider political economy, drawing together the threads of social and economic change, ideologies of gender relations and institutional and legal developments. Dowling, Schuler and Welch (1994) conducted a cross-national study of key issues in human resource management including recruitment and selection, performance appraisal, and employee relations. Their study suggests that national legislation plays a key role in shaping equal opportunity policies in organisations.

Proposition 2: Social policy impacts upon diversity management practices.

However, contextual influences are not limited to the legal framework of equal opportunity. Cultural implications for individual workplace experiences and perspectives are equally important. For example, scholars have highlighted significant cognitive differences in individuals, which are in turn shaped by their socio-cultural contexts. Syed, Ali and Winstanley (2005) demonstrate that working women in Muslim majority countries are generally more likely to experience contextual emotional labour because of the conflicting requirements of their societal and organisational identities. Research also reveals that in certain cultural contexts, micro-individual beliefs and attitudes are generally enmeshed in broader societal traditions and organisational norms to create unique arrangements of gendered organisation. Bennington (2001) notes that in Indonesia, not only are jobs gender-stereotyped but women also receive lower wages than men and may be hired as day labourers rather than full-time employees. Kondo (2001) contends that both Christian and Muslim women in the Philippines are expected to conform to gender-role stereotypes that cast them in the role of wife and mother. Research again reveals that at least some discriminatory practices may be legally protected in certain countries. For example, in Malaysia, under the Malaysian Constitution, ethnic Malays (the *bumiputras*) enjoy special privileges vis-à-vis business licenses and share ownerships of new companies (Burgess and Muthaly 2001). In Pakistan, according to Coleman (2004), General Zia's (late military ruler of Pakistan 1977–1988) version of Islamic laws served to retard female participation in economic activities. These examples suggest that the socio-cultural and legal contexts are closely intertwined with the organisational processes and individual outcomes of equal opportunity.

There is some evidence that scholars in other disciplines have mapped the complex and intertwined contexts associated with diversity from a relational perspective. For example, Ettlinger (2001) employs a relational perspective of diversity and competitiveness in the territory of economic geography. In the economically-oriented literature of diversity, focus is on organisation, not on people (Grabher and Stark 1997; Teece, Pisano and Shuen 1997). This form of approach is consistent with the prevailing business-case perspective of diversity management. Ettlinger notes that the easy, more usual path to confronting problems wrought by diversity remains focused on business benefits while entailing as little culture change as possible. This path tends to deepen labour segregation in a segmented labour market. In contrast, a more difficult path entails a comprehensive cultural change at a variety of levels, e.g. from the organisation to the household to the community to the local state. The aims of the present paper are consistent with the latter path because unless diversity is addressed through a comprehensive cultural transformation at multiple levels, its management in organisations will remain at best cosmetic and uneven.

Another unique feature of the relational framework that we propose in this paper is its ability to bridge the divide between objective and subjective aspects of equality. The focus

of some authors (e.g. Hakim 1991; Adler, Epel, Castellazzo and Ickovics 2000) has been upon objective measures of gender equality and segregation, implying that individual choices and orientations are the key determinants of their career outcomes. However, feminist scholars have long argued that subjective experiences such as overt and covert forms of exclusion – as well as the social construction of gender – mediate the career outcomes of women and men and lead to gendered divisions (De Lauretis 1986; Mackenzie 1997). Their social construction of identity is generally true not only for gender but for almost all forms of individual identity. Indeed, economic actors of diversity and its management cannot be conceived as rational and mechanistic economic entities. Rather, they are embedded in diverse social discourses and practices; their action significantly shaped by multilevel factors and variables, the significance of which varies in diverse contexts (Ettlinger 2003). Bottero and Irwin (2003) argue that social relationality in the context of locating difference along social divides of gender, ethnicity and class should be informed by an understanding of the intertwined nature of the cultural and material bases of social relations. They further argue that separating the two bases of social relations, as has been the case in earlier works, bodes ill when revealing the construction of the cultural as well as the material bases of social relations. Indeed, the relationship between cultural and material bases of social relations is vital to any understanding of the true nature of inequality in a given society. Syed (2008a) claims that some women, those in Muslim-majority nations or societies, for example, may, when considering their careers, make an informed choice to assume informal or unpaid work within the home because this type of arrangement may ultimately prove more productive for them. From a relational perspective, it could be deemed unwise to ignore the informed choices that people – both men and women – make based on their specific socio-economic circumstances. Because of its layered nature, the relational perspective enables us to consider both the subjective and objective aspects of equal opportunity. We argue that such a perspective is vital to approximate the context-specific social reality through rigorous juxtaposition of multiple layers of analysis and insights.

Proposition 3: Relational perspective of diversity management bridges the subjective and objective divide in research and practice.

The multilevel factors

The layered, multilevel approach to the study of a phenomenon is unique to the realist tradition (Layder 1993). The present paper draws attention to this tradition in the context of diversity management. Previous research suggests that the treatment of structure and agency from a layered perspective is crucial to understanding the organisation, the work and the worker in an interplay context, as interdependent rather than autonomous or independent entities (Layder 1993; Özbilgin and Tatli 2005). Research has also highlighted the significance of surveying the whole spectrum of work and life constituencies and their interdependence in order to arrive at a comprehensive understanding of equality of opportunity as a dynamic process (Korsgaard 1993). In his bid to approximate social reality, Bourdieu (1998) used the concepts of capital and dispositions at the micro level, habitus at the meso-level and the field at the macro-level of analysis in order to operationalise his realist project of social research. Inspired by the work of Bourdieu (1977, 1986, 1990, 1998) and Layder (1993), the present study explores diversity management as a construct and process, examining the phenomena through a three-pronged relational framework. The relational framework for diversity management that we

propose bridges micro-individual and agentic, meso-organisational and group-based, and macro-national and structural levels of analysis. It allows for the recognition of objective structures as well as subjective experiences as important aspects of equality or the lack thereof. The macro-national level involves structural conditions including social stratification and beliefs, and the social conception of law, education, family and work that either inhibits or enhances equality of opportunity for individuals. The meso-organisational level involves the organisational processes (habitus) and approaches to diversity which mediate employment opportunities according to individual abilities and contextual circumstances. The micro-individual level involves factors including individual agency, identity and various forms of human capital as key influences on individual capabilities and opportunities. It is, nevertheless, acknowledged that the layers defined here do not reside in different geographies but are irreducibly interdependent and interrelated: hence the term 'relational'. The inclusion of multiple levels of analysis allows for an examination of diversity and equal opportunity as a negotiated process, which is socially and historically embedded.

Proposition 4: A relational approach to diversity management makes it possible to view diversity issues across multiple levels of social reality.

The macro-level

At the macro-level of analysis, this paper takes into account the societal and structural conditions (laws, institutions, culture and political economy) that have an influence on different forms of disparity and discrimination, career trajectories and boundaries. The conventional macro approach is related to organisational thought via 'structuralisms' that hypothesise not individuals but self-subsistent 'cultures' and 'structures' as the unit of analysis. This approach usually predicts organisational functioning while treating individuals and groups as 'black boxes', 'based on the assumption that durable, coherent structures possess properties not reducible to the discrete elements of which they consist' (Kyriakidou and Özbilgin 2006, p. 4). It is, however, well-established that individuals and groups substantially influence macro-contextual phenomena. Individuals not only interact *with* but also *enact* environments (Weick 1991, emphasis added). They create jobs and, by extension, influence structures (Miner 1987). Also, research suggests that macro-national phenomena are a result of – and are in turn reinforced by – individual behaviours, with potentially important implications for individual-level opportunities and outcomes. For example, racism is an important macro-contextual factor in the well-being of ethnic minority individuals and their access to equal opportunities and societies and organisations (see Modood et al. 1997). Individual behaviours and the opportunities available to them are, therefore, reciprocally connected to context. The relational perspective has thus the ability to study behaviour in context (Gittell 2006).

In his recent study of the impact of context on organisational behaviour, Johns (2006) explains how context represents situational opportunities and constraints with potentially important implications for the occurrence and meaning of organisational behaviour. Particularly in the case of organisations operating in a culturally diverse society, socio-political and legal institutions play a key role in organisational approaches to diversity, equal opportunity and social justice. This paper argues that the promulgation of multicultural and equal opportunity policies at the social policy level has profound implications for managing diversity in the workplace. For example, based on their study of equal opportunities data obtained from the US Department of Labor archives, Kalev et al. (2006) report that employers subject to federal affirmative action edicts, who typically

assign responsibility for compliance to a manager, see stronger effects in diversity and equal opportunity programmes. Their study, which supports an institutional perspective of the remediation of workplace inequality, determines that structural elements are critical to augmenting women's participation in the managerial ranks.

However, national legislation is only one of several factors at the macro-level that influence the state of diversity management in organisations. Given the plurality of socio-economic discourses and practices in the world today, it is equally important to consider other factors, such as the implications of political ideology and national culture for work organisation. Many scholars (Ray and Sayer 1999; Escobar 2001; Williams and Windebank 2003) are investigating the growth of interest in national culture and the turn away from economy in the social sciences. Some scholars (see Williams 2005) argue that far from following unified capitalistic structures of economy, many societies today, particularly those with a post-socialist or post-colonial background, remain grounded in a form of work organisation characterised by a plurality of economic practices, both on the societal and household levels. Indeed, underpinning the current debates on diversity are enduring issues of integration, identity and citizenship that are influenced by political ideology (Cheong et al. 2007).

Another related issue is the historical context and its implications for the dynamics of diversity in the workplace (Cox 1995; Triandis 1995). Exploration of the history of inter-group relations is a vital prerequisite for an informed understanding of the socio-political and cultural background on which the social discourse and practices of diversity are constructed (Alderfer and Smith 1982). In other words, organisations usually reproduce rather than invent the historical diversity hierarchies that hold sway in the broader society (Steyaert and Janssens 2003). Occupational roles tend to be defined along gender or race-based on societal assumptions about these and other forms of identity that are rooted deep in the history of the labour market.

One mode of understanding labour market segregation is to examine the role of 'social difference codes' in the generation of inequality in the workplace. Ridgeway (2006) defines social difference codes as the 'widely shared cultural beliefs that delineate the socially significant distinctions among people on the basis of which a society is structured and inequality is organised' (p. 180). These codes reside both at the level of the individual and through acts of social engagement: they are shared and adopted to inform the macro structures of life. Gender, age, ethnicity and occupation are some of the examples of social difference codes broadly structured within the macro-context. Such codes act as cultural schemas for enacting social relations on the basis of individual attributes and dimensions of diversity by highlighting the dimensions by which people may be categorised and the traits and behaviours that can be expected as a result (p. 180).

Ettlinger (2001) maintains that diversity may also be seen as an unpracticed system because of the fundamentally political issue of power relations in both society and workplace. For example, critical race scholarship, post-colonial feminism and, more generally, cultural politics in non-Western contexts are enlightening if one is to understand how diversity and difference in the workplace are connected to political movements at the macro-national level (Benhabib 1996; Alvarez, Dagnino and Escobar 1998; Prasad 2001). There are numerous examples of how governmental policies regarding women's or ethnic minorities' rights tend to be influenced by an overarching political structure, which is manipulated by a powerful elite; for example, the backlash to affirmative action by white males in the US and the systematic resistance within organisations to value diversity (Prasad, Mills, Elmes and Prasad 1997). Similarly, the feminist political approach in Pakistan is historically inclined towards working with – rather than against – the state

in order to improve women's rights in that country (Jalal 1991). In other words, the transformation of the extant system of power relations in the workplace cannot be divorced from the broader macro-level factors (Ettlinger 2001).

Proposition 5: Macro context of the organisation shapes and is shaped by diversity management policies and practices.

The meso-level

Organisation is the analytical entity at the meso- or intermediate-level. Meso-research pertains to the relationships that occur between organisational contexts and component behaviour (individuals, groups and dyads), and examines how those relationships affect outcomes (House, Rousseau and Thomas-Hunt 1995). The meso-level of analysis can be understood through Bourdieu's description of 'habitus'. Bourdieu defines habitus as a:

> system of durable, transposable dispositions, structured structures predisposed to function as structuring structures, that is, as principles which generate and organise practices and representations that can be objectively adapted to their outcomes without presupposing a conscious aiming at ends or an express mastery of the operations necessary in order to attain them. (Bourdieu 1990, p. 53)

Central to the above description of habitus is the notion of deeply structured dispositions that have a direct influence upon action. From a relational perspective, an organisation's actions towards diversity management represent its socialised predispositions, and, as such, reflect the social attitudes directed towards diverse groups or individuals. From this perspective, habitus may be seen to be setting limits for organisational action while at the same time defining its aspirations and perceptions (Hulme and Truch 2006). This paper argues that an awareness of the implications of organisational habitus is crucial to any understanding of the level of individual opportunities in the workplace; it underpins an individual's ability to live and work free from exploitation and coercion in an unconstrained market (Van Der Linden 1988; Hill 2002).

Thomas and Ely (1996) offer three organisational approaches to diversity management. The first is the discrimination and fairness approach, the focus of which is compliance with certain equal opportunities legal requirements in employment. In this approach, managers expect all employees to assimilate to the dominant culture; deviations from the norm are viewed at least as a nuisance. The approach tends to reproduce the macro-level conditions that sustain mono-cultural dominance in organisations. Second is the access and legitimacy approach, which is based on the acceptance and celebration of diversity in the workplace. According to this approach, a diverse workforce helps organisations cater to the needs of a diverse market, helping them gain both access to – and legitimacy of – a variety of customers. However, this approach does not allow diverse employees to incorporate their unique perspectives into the larger organisation. Instead, they are often 'pigeonholed' and deployed to interact with clients with similar backgrounds. Thus the potential for an organisation to be a multicultural workplace is compromised. Third is the learning and effectiveness approach which allows employees to make choices based on their own cultural backgrounds. This last approach integrates these backgrounds into the work processes, bringing the whole person and not just a particular demographic trait into the organisation.

From a relational perspective, Thomas and Ely's (1996) third approach represents an inclusive work environment, which not only values multiculturalism but also acknowledges individual agency and the resources possessed by diverse employees. However, the first two approaches may be seen as organisational processes and routines that tend to

replicate macro-social difference codes within organisational hierarchies and inequalities. The consequence is generally a set of self-generating and self-organising mechanisms (habitus) in which the outcomes are largely determined by the contextual circumstances. In the words of Bourdieu:

> Habitus are generative principles of distinct and distinctive practices – what the worker eats, and especially the way he eats it, the sport he practices and the way he practices it, his political opinions and the way he expresses them are systematically different from the industrial owner's corresponding activities. But habitus are also classificatory schemes, principles of classification, principles of vision and division, different tastes. They make distinctions between what is good and what is bad, between what is right and what is wrong, between what is distinguished and what is vulgar, and so forth. (1998, p. 8)

The organisational habitus regenerate the principles of equality in the workplace, e.g. establish who is suitable for which jobs and how a person's membership of a specific group may (or may not) impact on her/ his prospects for employment or promotion. From a relational perspective, the meso-level mediates and negotiates employment opportunities in light not only of social (contextual) circumstances but also individual capital (individual aspirations and traits). Organisational culture usually creates shared values, commitment and beliefs, which are essential for organisational functioning and success. This paper argues that such shared values are often dominated by the preferences of the powerful elite (e.g. white males in the US), and, as such, the workplace perspectives and experiences of the marginalised groups and individuals remain ignored.

In the introductory section, we alluded to the fact that some scholars have expressed concern regarding a shift from a legally mandated equal opportunity approach to a voluntary corporate emphasis on the business benefits of diversity. In their critical review of diversity management in organisations, Miller and Rowney (2001) note that what was originally perceived as one step forward by diversity consultants may be described as two steps back in the project of non-discrimination in the workplace. Thus, the positioning of focus on diversity in organisations rather than on legislatively-defined oppressed groups may be seen as a backward step. This view is also shared by Konrad (2003), who notes that it is important to retain a central focus on power relations among various identity groups in organisations and to avoid diluting the diversity construct to the point where any group composed of dissimilar individuals becomes diverse by definition. This paper argues that unless the extant organisational approaches, policies and procedures are simultaneously reformed along with reforms at the macro- and micro-levels of diversity management, problems such as disparity of employment opportunities and outcomes will persist in organisations.

Proposition 6: Interactions and relationships at the level of the organisation inform the logic of diversity management policies and practices.

The micro-level

At the micro-level of analysis, this paper considers issues related to individual aspirations, identity and agency. We argue that, despite the potential influences of macro- and meso-level factors, each individual possesses the unique resources and agency that equip her/him to respond to the various issues and challenges that said individuals may have to confront both within and without the workplace. In organisational studies, the conventional micro approach begins with rationally treating individuals as the elementary unit of organisational contexts (Emirbayer 1997): it assumes the fixity of individual identities, priorities and objectives (Kyriakidou and Özbilgin 2006, p. 2). According to this approach, individuals react systematically to the social attributes of gender and

ethnicity (Konrad and Gutek 1987, p. 112). In contrast, the relational perspective maintains that individual actions may not be understood without considering individual interrelations. Individual identities and preferences are not pre-constituted: they do not enter into mutual interactions with their attributes already given. Rather, identities, including cultural values and networks of interpersonal, social relationships, are constituted within communities (Ashforth and Sluss 2006). One's sense of identity, therefore, may vary according to one's relations with others. Social interaction involves a complex process of negotiation (Stryker and Statham 1985) whereby individuals mutually define each other's roles and the situations they are in, and, on the basis of role expectations, the patterns of interaction that are deemed appropriate. The relational approach sees relations between structures and individuals as dynamic in nature, as unfolding, co-generative and ongoing processes rather than as static ties among their constituent elements (Kyriakidou and Özbilgin 2006).

Inevitably, the salience of any particular form of identity will remain subject to the forces of space and time. In Sweden and Norway, for example, progressive laws enabling women's inclusion in the workplace have made gender difference less of a concern than in the US, where working mothers are usually disadvantaged because of the meagre maternity benefits provided by law (Prasad et al. 2006). Similarly, in his study of ethnic minority women's employment situation in Australian organisations, Syed (2007) suggests that the layered experiences of job discrimination faced by minority ethnic women differ considerably from those of their mainstream sisters (white, English-speaking women). The study demonstrates that issues of individual identity are closely intertwined with the socio-cultural and historical contexts of diversity management. Furthermore, by virtue of unique individual differences, a salient problem of diversity is the conflicting nature of the goals of different groups and the multiple allegiances of individuals across groups (Folbre 1994). This paper argues that without mechanisms to understand the differences implicit in the multiple identities that a person can hold, such as those related to her or his gender, race and ethnicity (Bosco 1998), it will be difficult to resolve issues of power and conflict in the workplace.

From a relational perspective, one important consideration is the notion of individual capital (Özbilgin and Tatli 2005), a notion based on Bourdieu and Wacquant's (1992) objection to seeing human agency as enslaved by structures. In a departure from the tradition of human capital theorists (e.g. Becker (1967) whose conceptualisation of capital was limited to the more formal types of individual capital including education, financial resources and skills), Bourdieu (1998) argues that individuals draw on a wider spectrum of capitals (economic, social, cultural and symbolic capitals) in order to pursue their careers. Bourdieu and Wacquant argue that a notion of capital such as this is relevant to the interplay of agency and structure:

> Social agents are not 'particles' that are mechanically pushed and pulled by external forces. They are rather bearers of capitals, and depending on their trajectory and on the position they occupy in the field by virtue of their endowment (volume and structure) in capital, they have a propensity to orient themselves actively either towards the preservation of the distribution of capital or towards the subversion of this distribution. (1992, pp. 108–109)

Other scholars have also favoured a reframing of individual identity towards relational embeddedness (see Shotter and Gergen 1989). Considered from this perspective, identity may be seen as contradictory, fluid and contextually constrained, within which people are capable of exercising choice (Ely 1995, p. 184). It is constructed as a result of social interactions among individuals and groups within and without the workplace. Identity

from a relational perspective is neither fixed nor static; its fluid, processual nature is shaped by social relations (Alvesson and Billing 1997). For this reason, behaviour cannot be attributed to the individual alone; rather, it is seen as an outcome of a negotiated relationship with other individuals and multilevel actors (Steyaert and Janssens 2003).

In order to provide policy-makers, managers and scholars with a useful framework through which they can contextualise and improve diversity practices, in the next section we describe key features of the relational framework for diversity management. We argue that this type of conceptualisation may prove vital to examining and addressing the complex issues of diversity and equal opportunity.

Proposition 7: Individual level relationships and micro-politics of the workplace inform diversity management policies and practices.

A relational framework for diversity management

The most promising of the epistemological and methodological approaches to relationality in organisational studies, Özbilgin (2006) argues, are those that seek to bridge the agentic, social structural and contextual dimensions of organisational life with a sense of situatedness in time and space, often adopting pluralism rather than purism in their choice of disciplines and methods. The relational framework that we propose involves contextual, contingent and comparative elements, setting individual, organisational and structural phenomena against each other while at the same time making allowance for them to be situated in their social and historical contexts. The micro-level of the relational framework takes into account individual influences on equal opportunity, such as those related to individual agency and multiple identities. The meso- or intermediate-level is studied through an assessment of organisational approaches to diversity management. The macro-level is explored through an examination of legal, institutional and socio-cultural structures. We have argued that a layered analysis is constructive for the comparative examination of national cultures, labour markets and trajectories of social, political and economic history. Figure 1 offers a conceptual model of the relational framework for diversity management. Key variables of the model and some examples of associate research questions have been outlined in Table 1.

As shown in Figure 1, the macro-national context (the main circle) is the all-encompassing domain within which all other layers of diversity management exist. The domain comprises factors including the legal framework of diversity and equal opportunity, cultural traditions, political ideology(ies), and other elements of the socio-economic context. It is the domain within which social difference codes are defined, based upon generally accepted social stratifications and stereotypes such as a person's status based on his/her gender, age and ethnicity. There is a relational interdependence between the social difference codes and the interpersonal status hierarchies; mutually reinforcing each other and iteratively leading to the emergence of 'self-organising processes of inequality' (Ridgeway 2006, p. 181).

The smaller internal circle (left) in Figure 1 represents the meso-organisational domain of the relational framework, which exists within the macro-national context. The meso-level represents the various organisational approaches to diversity and equal opportunity, ranging from discriminatory policies to more inclusive diversity policies. The meso-level explains why social difference codes are generally replicated in employment contexts in the shape of organisational hierarchies and inequalities in the labour market. For instance, in extremely restrictive patriarchal societies, the institution of female seclusion adversely affects women's employment in formal organisations (Syed 2008c).

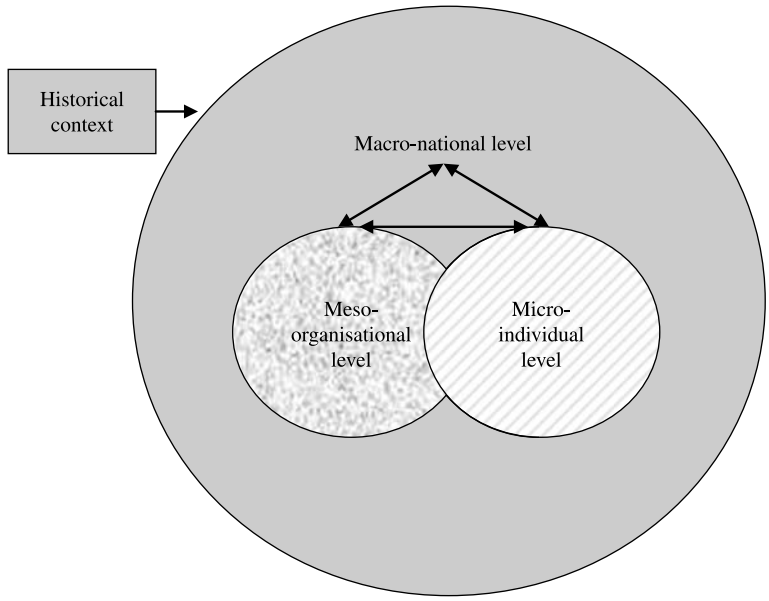


Figure 1. A relational perspective of diversity management.

The third and final circle in our relational model represents the micro-individual domain, which constitutes the unit(s) for the macro- and meso-domain. This is why the circle overlaps with the meso-domain, reflecting reciprocal influences among these layers of analyses. The micro-individual domain pertains (a) to a person's multiple and intersecting identities, that is, gender, race and social class, and (b) to her/his subjective experiences within societal and employment contexts because of these identities. A person becomes vulnerable and may experience disadvantage when subjected to negative social and organisational stereotyping. It is, however, acknowledged that despite macro- and meso-level influences, each individual possesses levels of unique resources and agency that equip her/him to formulate a suitable response to external challenges, both within and without the workplace.

The presence of the historical context in the background of Figure 1 indicates its significance as the canvas for the macro-national and other levels of relational analysis. The role of historical traditions (socio-political history, legal and cultural traditions) cannot be overstated in the generation and maintenance of inequalities at all three levels. Take, for example, the role of patriarchy in religious or cultural traditions or the political representation of women as objects of national resistance or cultural identity which, taken together, influence gender relations within a given society. The historical context thus represents the most important challenge faced by diversity management as it grapples with discriminatory practices and stereotypes, which are invariably deeply rooted in centuries-old traditions (Syed 2008a).

We have argued that there are a number of interrelated factors at multiple levels of analysis influencing diversity outcomes in organisations. The relational framework is converged on 'the space between', where agency, action and structures have causal interdependence (Buber 1970) and where they intertwine and co-generate social inter-dependencies and inter-subjectivities. The relational analysis situates individuals in their

Table 1. A relational framework for diversity management.

Relational level	*Description*	*Examples of variables*	*Examples of research questions*
Macro-national	Institutional structures; social difference codes and processes	Legislative framework of equal opportunity and diversity; socio-political policies; labour market; economy; demography; history.	To what extent does the history of the local context shape diversity management practices?
			To what extent do national laws and labour policies effectively provide equal opportunities to diverse workers?
			What stereotypes attach to different groups of diverse workers?
Meso-organisational	Organisational policies and hierarchies	Organisational approaches towards diversity; benchmarking and evaluation.	To what extent do organizational structures and policies afford equal opportunities to diverse workers?
			To what extent do interactions and relationships at the level of the organisation inform the logic of diversity management policies and practices?
Micro-individual	Identity and subjective experience in the workplace	Individual agency, perspectives and experiences; multiple identities	To what extent do diverse workers' individual lifestyles and values affect their integration or lack thereof in the workplace?
			To what extent do diverse workers' multiple and intersecting identities influence their career trajectories?

respective social positions in terms of volume and composition of their capitals (Bourdieu 1998). It compares, situates and examines individual, organisational and national phenomena in a state of interplay. By incorporating the sociological considerations of the relationality of structure and agency within the diversity management literature, we have endeavoured to present a realistic, contextual and interdisciplinary perspective on diversity management.

The relational framework that we have proposed in this paper is generic; however, its design permits the simultaneous taking into account of the specific context and content of diversity management. Indeed, while the conventional concepts and practices of diversity management are valuable, their transference into non-US contexts, into non-Western contexts in particular, requires that specific macro-national, meso-organisational and micro-individual factors be taken into account. For example, previous research suggests that being alert to occupational as well as socio-cultural differences can improve our understanding of the structural circumstances that frame the conditions and experiences of work. Again, it may be that the social science models of work, organisation and individual relations that have been grounded in Western contexts may be less effectual in other national contexts (Johns 2001). For example, a study of the implementation of diversity management in South Africa found that diversity practices had to be locally

reinterpreted in line with the different legal, cultural and historical contexts of that country (Strydom and Erwee 1998). Due to cross-national differences (for example, the strength of the religious traditions of several Muslim-majority countries in Asia and Africa (Syed et al. 2005)), often reflected in a variety of legal and economic structures, it will be crucial to consider the contextual factors underlying the various organisational practices and structures (Rousseau and Fried 2001; Triandis 2003).

Table 1 shows the management implications of the proposed relational framework. It describes how a number of variables operating at the macro-national and micro-individual levels have implications for meso-organisational approaches to managing diversity. For example, Table 1 highlights the possible implications of diversity and equal opportunity laws for equal opportunities in the workplace. The related research question pertains to the extent to which national laws and labour policies affect employment opportunities available to diverse workers. Similarly, at the micro-level, diverse workers' personal attributes (e.g. gender, age) and circumstances (e.g. marital status, migration status) may influence their career trajectories. The table explains how the macro- and micro-level factors are interrelated to the meso-level organisational approaches towards managing diversity. For example, organisational policies may range from a legally driven approach towards equal opportunity to a more proactive managing diversity approach consistent with the values of multiculturalism.

There is some evidence that scholars are moving in the direction of a relational framework, paying attention to the interconnectedness of the multilevel factors. For example, in their review of the impact of cultural values on HRM policies and practices, Stone, Stone-Romero and Lukaszewski (2007, p. 156) argue that national culture influences organisational culture and values. In turn, organisational values affect job design, job specifications and the prototypes of ideal job applicants. As a result, there may be a host of negative consequences for individuals whose culture differs from that of the dominant culture. Similarly, Kalev and colleagues' (2006) study of implications of affirmative action laws suggests that macro-level structural elements are critical to augmenting women's participation in the managerial ranks. Indeed, organisation, as one of many actors, has a critical role in developing and implementing work routines and structures which are inclusive for diverse individuals and groups. However, the paper has argued that there are other influences, such as social stereotypes, anti-discrimination laws, and individual agency and identity, which reside outside the organisation domain. Therefore, issues related to managing diversity cannot be understood or tackled at any one discrete level; a relational multilevel approach is needed.

Proposition 8: Changes in the context of work and life and variations in social and economic conditions across countries require a contextual approach to diversity management.

Researchers are encouraged to move to an examination of the various contextual variables, such as anti-discrimination and human rights laws, and how they affect real and perceived limitations on employment opportunities available to diverse workers. Researchers may note that hypotheses in multilevel research may describe not simply the direction of the relationship between constructs but also the level or across levels of each predicted relationship, such as a multilevel homologous relationship which would allow researchers to generalize both constructs and functional relations linking the constructs across different levels (Klein and Kozlowski 2000). For example, researchers may like to investigate the extent to which anti-discrimination laws affect organisational policies and diverse workers' career trajectories, and that the extent to which the implications of a

phenomenon (anti-discrimination regime in this case) are similar or different across different levels. It can be noted that multilevel validation can serve as the basis for distinctive or similar interventions directed at the same phenomena at multiple levels of analysis, e.g. diversity management strategies at the meso-organisational level and legal procedures at the macro-national level. Table 1 presents a number of possible research questions that might be of interest to future researchers. Indeed, construct and model choices of future researchers would drive the operationalisation of the constructs and the sampling plan. However, a multitude of research methods, all of which should be treated as complementary, can be deployed to conduct such research at various levels. For example, while quantitative techniques may be useful to develop an authoritative generalizing account of diverse workers' roles (such as female labour force participation rates) and issues (such as legal complaints) in various industries and sectors of economy, in depth qualitative insights (such as based on diverse workers' own narratives) may be useful to explore the complex individual-level perspectives and experiences that characterize workers' everyday work routines.

We hope that the relational framework will inspire future scholars not least because most of the research into diversity and equal opportunity is greatly influenced by the psychology paradigm. Cross-disciplinary research teams made up of psychologists, HRM academics, sociologists and economists might be one solution. Obviously this will not happen without a great deal of introspection and soul-searching within the disciplines and some recognition that purist approaches can be misleading and may lead to muddled analyses on the ground. Due to its reliance on a contextual multilevel study of diversity, the relational framework is likely to be of particular interest to researchers of diversity in non-Western contexts, such as in Muslim majority countries in Asia and Africa. Scholars may, for example, opt to investigate the nature of gender relations in the dominant religion in one specific country and its implications for organisational practices of equal opportunity. Similarly, scholars may decide to investigate the impact of patriarchal cultural traditions drawing upon individual subjective experiences of sex discrimination in the workplace. In addition to the main factors, education, industry and types of organisation may also be studied as moderators.

Proposition 9: Relational perspective of diversity management offers a contextual and multilevel account of diversity management policies and practices at work.

Conclusion

We have proposed a relational framework through which diversity management can be understood from a contextual and multilevel perspective. The paper has argued that a relational approach can counter the dissonance across findings of diversity studies that either dissect strands of equality, contextual processes and dimensions of work and life or study these from a single layer perspective. The relational framework not only brings together insights from all layers of analysis transcending micro-, meso- and macro-level analysis but also helps question where agency and structures may reside. Moreover, a relational approach may be instrumental in developing a comprehensive understanding of the unique discourses and enactments of diversity management within each society because of its reliance on macro-national and historical contexts in addition to organisational and individual level considerations. We have argued that such an approach is vital to overcoming the traditional criticisms of local non-compatibility and cultural imperialism, which are generally associated with the Anglo-Western notion of diversity

management in Asian and other non-Western contexts. In the same way, the relational approach can make it possible to transcend disciplinary *silos* and methodological demarcations as it draws on the tradition of critical realism. As we have briefly indicated, the layered notion of reality in critical realism means that life and work can be studied as involving objective structures, measurable attributes and processes, subjective experiences, interpretations and stand points. Therefore, the relational framework that we attempt to outline here not only transcends the positivistic versus interpretive dichotomy in research methods but also captures the objective and subjective realities of diversity and equal opportunity.

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