

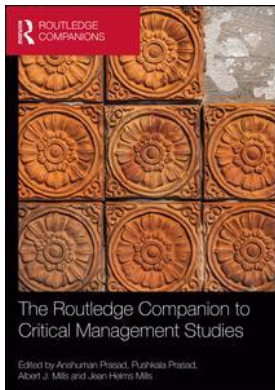
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Power failure

The short life and premature death of critical “diversity” research

Roy Jacques

Introduction

Critical signifiers have a short shelf life. French Impressionist paintings that once constituted a radical critique of perception are now sold as wallpaper. *Viva Guevara*: Che Guevara lives – as a T-shirt icon, \$21.95 plus shipping. The complex contributions of a half-century of Continental critical theorizing are today being methodologically lobotomized into mere narrative analysis pretentiously rechristened “discourse analysis” (*cf.* Grant, Hardy, Oswick & Putnam, 2004; Fairclough, 1995). With Procrustean dependability, genuine radicals are systematically replaced by “tempered radicals” (Meyerson, 2001), upholding the status quo from their positions of privilege while providing just enough *faux* challenge to the powers that be to drive out any substantive one.

Where does diversity research stand in this regard? This is an important question to critical scholars. Can one resist the tyranny of the status quo by doing critical diversity scholarship, or is that term now an oxymoron? Has diversity scholarship become a tool for assuring that marginality remains marginal? Is a “tempered radical” merely a self-flattering term for a conservative?

In this chapter, rather than asking what diversity *does* or *should* mean in an abstract sense, I am asking what it *has* meant to date as a cultural production, primarily in the American case (i.e., in case of the United States). Using content analysis of the papers and symposia that have been presented in the conference programs of the Gender & Diversity Division of the Academy of Management of the United States, I have attempted to paint an empirical picture of the boundaries of diversity research.

Why the American case? The term ‘diversity’ originates from American research; American concerns have been central to shaping the meanings it has assumed. For better and for worse, Americans enthusiastically export diversity ‘knowledge’ worldwide through scholarly work, textbooks, popular writing and corporate products. American cultural values permeate American social thought, yet research rarely indicates awareness of this fact (Jacques, 1992). Just as Rabinow (1986: 241) encouraged us to “anthropologize the West” in order to make space for other social realities, an international understanding of diversity research must contextualize and critique the

influence of American differences and American values on the production and shaping of this complex signifier.

The radical potential of diversity discourse

Jones (2004) refers to the two divergent potentials inherent in diversity discourse. On the one hand, she writes “To talk about diversity and difference is to talk about the constantly shifting power relationships between the margins and the centre” (p. 281). On the other hand, her title “Screwing Diversity out of the Workers” graphically suggests the negative potential of the diversity signifier to reinforce marginality. As American diversity research has become increasingly institutionalized, we would do well to heed Jones’s phrase “constantly shifting power relationships”. What has reinforced marginality is not sameness or difference per se but the *power* to determine how sameness or difference will become salient and which differences will be so.

At its point of emergence a generation ago, diversity discourse was inherently radical to a degree because it was destabilizing both to work organizations and to management theory in general. It is clear how the status quo was challenged by the movement of women and non-white people into positions of authority, but there is a second, less visible way in which diversity discourse has had radical potential. It challenges our understanding of the very object of organization and management theory – the universal individual. In the formative decades of what has become management discourse, the subject of knowledge was simply the human being – what applied to one presumably applied to all, subject to differences that could be specified as personal or situational ‘variables’. We could be tall or short, educated or ignorant, skilled or unskilled, but presumably under these surface differences we are all alike.

From Walter Dill Scott (Scott & Clothier, 1923) to Rensis Likert (1967), organizational behavior was simply the behavior of ‘people’, who differed in their possession of psychological variables, such as personality, but who shared a universal framework in which the same variables had the same relationship to one another and to social reality. This generic subject facilitated the mass production of management knowledge about those who, in parallel fashion, mass-produced the goods of society. It was also, we should acknowledge, a relatively liberal response to earlier proto-managerialist writing grounded in social Darwinist and eugenic thought (e.g. Blackford & Newcomb, 1914). A detailed history of the generic employee as a subject of management knowledge may be found in Jacques (1992).

The assumption that we are all just people, the same as one another under the skin, was a progressive response to this “scientific racism” (Shipman, 2002). The generic subject of management research dominated for several decades, then began to erode. It became a white subject in the wake of the American Civil Rights movement. ‘He’ became a masculine subject as the gendered nature of management came under feminist scrutiny. Today, ethnicity, sexual orientation and a host of other identities mark the main subject of organizational research not as ‘humanity’ but as subgroups of our species who share identity group memberships. One could justifiably argue that the greatest insight of the last half-century regarding the subject in organizations has been the gradual discovery of the profound degree to which human ‘nature’ – social reality itself – is contingent upon the shaping forces of social identity.

This is the ‘paradigm’ problem that has been central to debates within the social constructionist, poststructuralist, postcolonial and other anti-essentialist perspectives which have emerged in critical social thought in the last few decades. People, it seems, do not simply differ

in the *degree* to which they possess a group of universal variables; they also differ by social identity group in the *saliency* of these variables, in the *relationship* of these variables to each other and even in *which* variables structure perception, value, belief – and thus action – within that group.

This has been problematic for Empiricist social theory. The presumed homogeneity of human subjectivity was foundational to the still incomplete project of developing a cohesive set of testable propositions about human behaviour in organizations. The so-called Hawthorne effect was supposed to have been a discovery about ‘people,’ not the reactions of female, immigrant, young, poor people. Mintzberg’s (1971) ‘classic’ study was about what ‘managers’ really do, not what white, male, Canadian managers of a certain age, status and relationship to Mintzberg *père* do. As a diversity literature has developed into a profusion of research clusters focusing on the uniqueness of one and then another identity group, the dream of producing “a general theory of action” (Parsons & Shils, 1967) has receded like a horizon. Receding along with it is the credibility of the management disciplines. At risk are jobs and extensive resources in the business schools and in work organizations; one should expect that this would create strong resistance to change. The signifier ‘diversity’, then, does not simply have the potential to challenge social privilege. It also threatens the still dominant (if quixotic) Empiricist project of creating a statistical academic discourse about the person in work organizations.

Method

This study is not – as some earlier reviewers have erroneously imagined – an example of hypothetico-deductive analysis done badly. No statistically testable hypothesis is intended in the design. This work may more appropriately be considered interpretive content analysis. Quantification is used to subjectively create a portrait of the terrain surveyed. The method employed in this study is similar to that of Mintzberg (1971). For further discussion on this topic, the reader is invited to refer to Prasad (2005) and Burrell and Morgan (1979).

Data for the present review consist of the titles and abstracts of all papers and symposia presented in the Gender and Diversity in Organizations programs at the 10 Academy of Management meetings 1998–2007. Since the division changed its domain from “women in management” to “gender & diversity” in 1998, the sample represents a comprehensive population of everything presented as symposia or research papers by this division in its first decade. Certainly, relevant work has also been done in other divisions of the Academy of Management and elsewhere worldwide. However, the sum total of presentations at so professionally central a conference can reasonably be supposed to constitute an excellent proxy for the scope, emphases, theoretical approaches and assumptions structuring American academic discourse on the topic. The data have not been updated for submissions 2008–present because this would change only the number of submissions, not the pattern of content.

Objective and subjective information about each submission was recorded in a database. Non-diversity-related contributions from other divisions were eliminated. To equate papers and symposia, a symposium was recorded as if it were a single, multiply authored paper. The final database consisted of $n = 949$ papers and symposia. Categories were developed inductively. Significance testing was not deemed relevant and was not conducted. Results are presented as tabulations and percentages designed to show descriptively where the effort of a decade of diversity research has been placed. Tabulation of key data may be found in Tables 9.1–9.3.

Table 9.1a An empirical definition of diversity, 1998–2007: Most popular themes.

	TOTAL	2007	2006	2005	2004	2003	2002	2001	2000	1999	1998	
	%	Number										
[Does not match total submissions due to multiple entries.]	861	130	86	102	123	96	71	65	75	60	53	
GENDER	42.7	405	38	43	43	56	39	27	40	33	27	
Sex difference – Total	38.7	367	36	38	40	50	31	25	38	30	23	
Male/female difference	26.1	248	17	29	28	39	26	18	24	18	14	
Women	11.8	112	17	9	12	11	5	7	12	12	8	
Men	0.7	7	2	0	0	0	0	0	2	0	1	
Gendering of bodies	4.0	38	2	5	3	6	8	2	2	3	4	
RACE/ETHNICITY	13.8	131	14	21	17	12	10	12	11	8	5	
Race unspecified	6.1	58	7	8	5	7	4	4	6	3	3	
Ethnicity unspecified	1.2	11	1	3	1	1	1	1	1	0	1	
African-American, black	2.6	25	1	5	5	2	2	5	0	1	1	
Hispanic American	1.4	13	0	2	1	1	1	1	2	1	0	
Asian	0.4	4	1	1	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	
people of color	0.2	2	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	1	0	
minorities	0.6	6	0	0	0	1	1	1	2	1	0	
ethnic (vs. non-ethnic)	0.1	1	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	
native (vs. immigrant)	0.1	1	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	
Indian (from India)	0.2	2	2	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	
White	0.8	8	2	2	3	0	0	0	0	0	0	

Table 9.1a (Continued)

CULTURE	TOTAL													
	%	Number	2007	2006	2005	2004	2003	2002	2001	2000	1999	1998		
Organizational culture	6.6	63	20	4	5	8	5	5	5	4	3	4		
National culture	0.1	1				1								
Unspecified, general	0.0													
Australia	2.3	22	6	2	2	4	2	1	2	1	1	1		
Brazil	0.2	2	2											
U.S.	0.2	2	2											
France	0.1	1	1									1		
Japan	0.1	1			1									
Mexico	0.1	1			1									
Korea	0.3	3	1			2								
China – PRC	0.8	8	1				1	2	1	1	1	1		
China – Hong Kong	0.3	3	1							1	1	1		
China – Taiwan	0.2	2	1							1				
India	0.2	2		1				1						
Ghana	0.1	1				1								
Turkey	0.1	1					1							
Norway	0.1	1						1						
Italy	0.1	1					1							
Europe	0.1	1							1					
Pakistan	0.2	2												
Sweden	0.2	2	2											
Holland	0.2	2	2											
New Zealand	0.1	1							1					
Religion – Unspecified	0.1	1												
Religion – Islam	0.2	2	1	1										
GENERIC DIFFERENCE – No identity specified	29.0	275	43	30	33	55	23	17	21	20	16	17		

Table 9.1b An empirical definition of diversity, 1998–2007: Less common themes.

	TOTAL	2007	2006	2005	2004	2003	2002	2001	2000	1999	1998	
	%	Number										
Hidden identities	3.1	12	8	11	14	11	7	9	9	6	1	
LGBT specifically	2.7	3	2	5	3	3	2	3	3	5	0	
Other (e.g. chronic illness, belief)	0.3	0	0	1	0	1	1	0	0	0	0	
Disability	2.0	1	2	0	4	4	2	4	1	1	0	
Physical	1.9	1	1	0	4	4	2	4	1	1	0	
Mental	0.1	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	
Appearance	0.8	0	0	1	1	1	1	0	4	0	0	
Weight/obesity	0.4	0	0	1	1	1	1	0	0	0	0	
Attractiveness	0.4	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	4	0	0	
Age	1.3	2	1	1	2	3	1	1	0	0	1	
Being a certain age	0.9	2	1	0	2	2	1	1	0	0	0	
Caring for those of a certain age	0.2	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	1	
Singles	0.1	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	
Family type	0.4	0	2	1	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	
Bullying	0.1	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	
Social class	1.6	6	1	3	2	0	1	1	1	0	0	
Class/caste	0.5	1	1	1	0	0	0	1	1	0	0	
Privilege	0.2	0	0	1	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	
Poverty	0.3	1	0	1	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	
“Dirty work”	0.5	4	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	

Table 9.2 Common perspectives and topics.

	2007 2006 2005 2004 2003 2002 2001 2000 1999 1998												
	123	119	95	133	108	80	83	80	73	58			
TOTAL SUBMISSIONS [some submissions uncategorizable]	%												
Correcting perceptual bias	n =												
General	149	13	25	16	29	20	13	11	13	4	5	5	
Personnel issues: Hiring, promotion, careers, etc.	77	10	6	8	6	8	5	4	9	11	10	10	
Organizational justice. Justice – Perceptions	9	0	2	0	2	2	0	2	0	1	0	0	
Relational Demography	33% 312												
General	142	6	30	14	24	24	14	8	11	8	3	3	
Organizational justice – Empirical antecedents/consequences	3	0	1	2	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	
Effect of diversity on organizational performance	119												
Positive	55	6	1	6	6	11	6	8	3	2	6	6	
Negative	1	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	
Situational (or relationship unclear from abstract)	63	14	1	4	14	4	1	4	10	11	0	0	
Moderately constructionist: Social ID / Social Network Theory	48	6	11	8	5	4	2	6	3	2	1	1	
“Identity-ist” and other antiessentialist	4%	42											
Human Capital / Social Capital	1%	13											
Work-life/work-family	10%	98											
Personnel	8%	79											
Violence/harassment	4%	38											
To women	22	0	0	4	2	4	1	4	3	2	2	2	
To men, other identities	3	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	1	1	1	
General unspecified	13	1	0	0	0	0	1	1	2	4	4	4	
International comparisons	3%	32	2	4	3	11	1	3	5	1	1	1	
EEO/affirmative action/glass ceiling	3%	32	4	4	5	1	0	2	11	1	2	2	
Mentoring	2%	23	3	3	1	4	2	4	3	1	2	0	
Decision making/rational action	4%	35	15	4	6	3	2	1	2	1	1	0	
Privilege, creation/maintenance	1%	9	2	2	1	2	1	1	0	0	0	0	
Backlash/resistance	0%	4	1	1	0	0	0	1	0	1	0	0	

Reviewing the data

What identities are 'diverse'?

So, what has counted as diversity? As Figure 9.1 indicates, three groups constitute more than 85% of submissions reviewed. If one combines ethnicity and national culture, which have not systematically been distinguished as separate constructs in this literature, the proportion climbs to 92%. There are some interesting presences and absences in this data.

Gender

The 43% representation of gender studies is somewhat proportional to the fact that half of the world's population is female. What is more surprising is that most 'gender' research in this sample is not gender research at all. A well established distinction shared between mainstream and critical scholars has long been that 'gender' refers to socialized difference which is not inherently connected to the male or female body. Differences between male and female bodies are properly referred to as 'sex' differences. In the pool of *Women in Management* articles reviewed by Calás & Jacques (1988), this distinction had been rigorously observed. A generation later, apart from a few of the more traditional social psychology researchers who refer, properly, to sex difference or sex effects, it is commonplace to describe any article related to male/female difference as being about 'gender'. Of 405 submissions related to gender, only 38 in any way addressed the construction of masculinity/femininity. The remaining 90% simply studied differences between a male and a female pool of research subjects.

This practice constitutes an implicit return to social Darwinist trait theories, in which cognitive and behavioural attributes are attributed to subjects based upon 'physiognomy'. There is irony in this. Where sex difference has been studied, it has overwhelmingly been by researchers with progressive intent who sought to establish "no significant difference" between marginal and dominant populations in their ability to work effectively (Jacobson & Jacques, 1990). Socially, this has meant that there is no reason to presume women less effective than men. However, if researchers were not committed to maintaining male superiority, they showed total dedication to using the Empiricist tools of their training. Thus, decades after gender construction has been recognized, males and females continue to be used as proxies for gender, not because they are appropriate but because they are operationalizable.

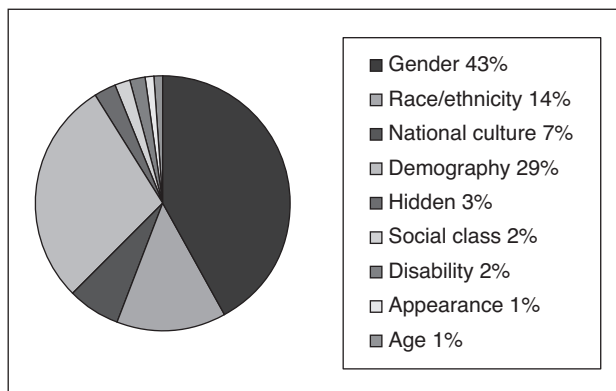


Figure 9.1 Topics researched

Among the 10% of these studies which did address gender construction, most were from Interpretive or anti-essentialist perspectives. Most represented the work of European contributors. This represents a backsliding in terms of the mainstream understanding of gender in the American academy. In the 1980s, there were even popular Empiricist models, such as the Bem Sex Role Inventory, which offered conceptual models for de-essentializing male/female difference. In the period covered by the present review, biological difference has been used unquestioningly as a proxy for male/female differences – within theory in which they are conceived to be social.

Race

Since the construct of race is not biologically meaningful, it is incumbent upon ‘race’ researchers to stipulate how this notion has been conceptualized in their research. For instance, to Benjamin Franklin, German immigrants to Pennsylvania c. 1800 were not white; to mainstream Americans of the late 1800s, Italian and Eastern European immigrants were not white (Jacques, 1992). Today, both are widely considered to be white in race research. What, then, constitutes whiteness?

These studies lack rigorous discussion of their central variable, relying instead on unexamined, populist, American notions of race. Of the “race/ethnicity” subcategories in Table 9.1a ($n = 131$), *all* refer to American racial difference. In the category “culture” ($n = 63$), a possible proxy for race, the majority compared a research sample in a ‘diverse’ (e.g. non-U.S.) country with ‘the literature’, which has of course been derived largely from American samples. This amounts to judging all other countries according to a U.S.-based deficit model. Table 9.3 identifies only 32 studies which were multinational comparisons; thus, a minimum of 84% of race studies were either studies of the U.S., or they compared the world to a U.S. template. There was no discussion of the difficulty of conceptualizing race or of the limits of generalizability.

Even among American studies of race, the tetralogy of white/black/Hispanic/Asian dominates the discussion. With every culture in the world represented in the American population, how has ‘diversity’ been narrowed to relations among these four (very heterogeneous) populations? The answer is inseparable from the specifics of American cultural history. What it means to be ‘of color’ in the U.S. is not automatically transportable to other countries. To be a ‘black fella’ in Australia or ‘brown’ in New Zealand is a meaningful signifier but one whose relationships of power and marginality in those countries are simultaneously similar to and different from race in America in complex ways irreducible to a ‘variable’.

These studies constitute an a theoretical set of comparisons based on a random smattering of racial, ethnic and national categories. They underscore the need for theoretical frameworks to help us understand which differences count as ‘diverse’ (Konrad, Prasad & Pringle, 2006; Nkomo & Cox, 1996). Not only is our understanding constrained by simplistic and culturally specific American fault lines. At the other extreme, identifiable social groups worldwide can be ‘diverse’ for the purposes of research. How can one conceptualize cultural memberships in a way that both permits the expression of local voice and captures more generalizable aspects of the dynamics of marginalization?

Is national difference a proxy for race? In 59 studies, it is treated as such. One suspects that there is a great difference in the degree to which this category captures a coherent unit of analysis. At one extreme, to be Japanese is probably a highly salient category for (non-Ainu) Japanese. In contrast, between China and Indonesia, using nationality as a proxy for race is undermined both by the fact that China is multi-ethnic and by the presence of a significant Han Chinese ethnic minority in Indonesia. A ‘race’ comparison of Americans and Mexicans might sneak past a ‘white’ American reviewer, but what of a comparison of Americans to the Canadian ‘race’? National difference is meaningful, but it is not reducible to ethnicity, and there has been an absence of discussion regarding how to theorize it.

One final thought on race is that this review does not contain a single paper discussing indigeneity. This may again result from the dominance of U.S. cultural history in shaping diversity discourse, since U.S. history with first peoples has been nearly genocidal. Contrast this to the experience of New Zealand, where first peoples (the Maori) still constitute about one-seventh of the population and have treaty rights with the British crown which (albeit incoherently) stipulate rights to some form of bicultural national co-governance. In this context, problems of marginality overlap with problems of indigeneity, but they are not entirely congruent.

Being 'brown' in New Zealand is a marker of marginality, but it is not historically associated with slavery. African-Americans do not claim to be indigenous Americans, but Maori do claim rights as the people of *Aotearoa*, the Maori land within which European New Zealand formed, marginalizing but not eliminating it. Maori share some issues such as health and housing with Sa'amoan, Tongan and other *Pasifika* New Zealanders, but only Maori have first-people rights, and each group has its distinct culture. This intersection of race and indigeneity has no complete parallel in American race discourse. In what ways can we extrapolate from American experiences and in what ways do these relationships have their own local shape and specificity? Worldwide, further examples are everywhere, yet the theoretical problem of Americanism shaping a diversity literature around American relationships constitutes a deafening silence in the literature.

Demographics

Incongruously, the second most popular category of diversity research does not even specify what is diverse about the subjects studied! Difference is specified only as 'demography' or 'identity', as though all differences are created equal. Examples of topics in this area would include the relationship between team diversity and team performance or the relationship between a company's diversity reputation and profitability. On the one hand, rising above the profusion of individual variables is theoretically laudable. As Tables 9.1a–9.1b show, the range of various differences is computationally intractable from a data processing perspective. Hypothetically, abstracting from individual identity differences to a demography is a feasible way to make the problem tractable, but at what cost? When 'diversity' becomes 'demography', does what remains elucidate the relationships of diversity or remove them from analysis altogether? There are already entire fields dedicated to the study of all demographic difference among social groups. We call them sociology and anthropology. How, if at all, is diversity research not merely a pale reflection of these?

Absences

One notable absence in these articles is religion, the topic of a mere three studies. Although it is a formidable shaping force in the world today, religious identity has barely entered diversity discourse. Perhaps more surprising is the near absence ($n = 15$) of studies related to social class, caste or poverty, since exclusion from wealth is so tightly associated with marginality as to be almost definitional of it. While there is delicious irony in a field having removed the marginal from the diversity discourse, one might question how methodologically or socially appropriate this silencing is.

Topics addressed

The preceding section has considered *who* is considered diverse. This section will discuss *what* researchers have wanted to know about them. Again, a small number of categories account for the preponderance of work. Figure 9.2 summarises the results of this analysis.

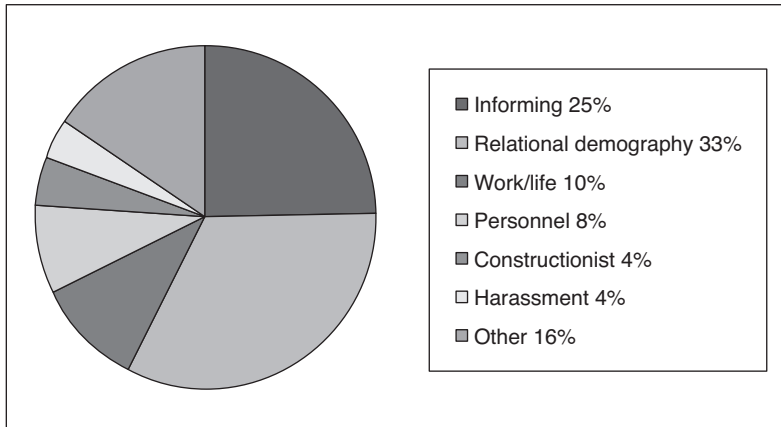


Figure 9.2 Topics addressed.

Relational demography

Fully a third of submissions utilized some form of social identity theory or social network theory to conceptualize diversity as a 'network imbalance'. Most often, this pool of submissions stipulated only that 'diversity' was the variable of interest, as though diversity itself is directly measurable without making operationalizing assumptions. Of this group, nearly half (45%) were attempts to describe the general network, abstracting people entirely out of the problematic. Of the remainder, the central topic of interest has been the effect of diversity on team performance, not on team members.

There has been one limited area of theoretical progress. A generation ago, it was widely accepted within this research that diversity improves team performance. This has given way to a more nuanced exploration of the conditions under which it does and does not. On the positive side of the ledger, promoting team performance has been one of the motivational wedges that diversity researchers have used to stimulate corporate interest in diversity. For this reason, the contribution of this stream of research should not be dismissed. At the same time, the prominence of this stream raises the threat that diversity might come to be understood only as an issue of profitability, to the exclusion of equity.

Informing people of misperceptions

Fully a quarter of all contributions ($n = 235$) have been implicitly informed by the Gospel of John (8:32), "You shall know the truth and the truth shall make you free". Marginality is conceptualized as an information deficit of the marginal, the dominant or both. No doubt, some marginalization is accomplished unknowingly by people who would act otherwise if they knew better, but how much? Probably not all and perhaps only a little. Ferguson (1984), in her analysis of patriarchy, suggests that the reason the privileged do not 'get it', despite ample, available evidence, is that privilege is pretty much the ability to *choose* to not get it. Provisionally, one might postulate three degrees of diversity issues, each with different dynamics in this regard:

- 1 Ignorance-based discrimination.
- 2 Accommodation.
- 3 Privilege maintenance.

All three of these may be simultaneously present, but the value of information differs among them. *Ignorance* may be well addressed by accurate information. When an expatriate manager has to work in a different culture or new immigrants enter a work group in which they are an unfamiliar minority, the challenge may be to generate and share information. However, with *accommodation*, challenges such as employment of workers with mobility restrictions or different religious holidays, the problems do not disappear when ignorance does. Workers *do* need special consideration; employers may face significant costs; co-workers may dislike accommodating. Addressing accommodation issues effectively requires some information but further requires dealing with workplace power issues. A commitment to social equity, as well as to knowledge, is demanded. The third type of issue, *privilege maintenance*, is well summed up by the old bumper sticker: 'I'm not deaf; I'm ignoring you'. Research directed merely at correcting ignorance does little to contribute to points 2 and 3 in the list. We would be well reminded that John (8:32) refers to personal revelation, not to social change.

Work/life balance

Fully a tenth of all studies have addressed issues of work and family roles. This is a potentially useful research stream, but is it diversity research at all? Every worker also has a life. There is nothing inherently 'diverse' about studying work and family roles. Historically, this body of research was produced as a gender issue due to women's well documented disadvantages relative to men in this area, but that is not necessarily what work/family research must – or does – study. When the research subject is gender-unspecified or when the study is about the problems of men, where is the diversity issue? A cross-cultural work/life comparison does not necessarily impinge on gender issues. If everyone has work and family problems and a general body of information is being developed about them, is this not a general societal issue?

Constructionism

The topics explored also suggest an important issue in terms of research assumptions. Fewer than 4% of these articles claim a social constructionist or anti-essentialist theoretical position. However, this entire body of work is implicitly constructionist because it assumes that the social reality studied can be changed. The submissions grounded in social identity theory and social network theory focus on the construction of identity. One of the largest categories explicitly focuses on cognition and perception. Topics such as group performance and mentoring are based on values, perceptions and beliefs which affect people's behavior towards each other. This is significant because it points to a red herring division among diversity researchers.

Certain dichotomous divisions from the so-called paradigm wars of the 1980s have become unproductively entrenched in our conventional wisdom. One of these is the opposition of "positivist to non-positivist" (Konrad, Prasad & Pringle, 2006). This need not be the case. For our research purposes, whether one believes in a constructed or an objective ultimate reality is unimportant. We have, *de facto*, defined the research problematic as one that is socially constructed through personal, interpersonal and institutional social forces.

One should not, however, suppose that objectivist methods are at all incompatible with researching a constructed problematic. Such methods can be useful for documenting empirically stable relationships, whether these are constructed or not. That they cannot deliver the Real is not a liability compared to other methods, since none can. Where there are differences of importance between researchers, they do not involve method, but epistemology, training and ideology. Taking the constructed nature of the problematic seriously would dramatically transform this body of research.

Levels of analysis

Nearly two-thirds (61%) of these studies focused on the individual and, of these, the preponderance focused on the marginal (Table 9.3). There is both positive and negative potential in this skewness. It is laudable to attempt to understand the marginal, but in these studies the marginal are not sources of voice but merely sources of data. As Miller (1976: xix) appropriately warned, “The close study of an oppressed group reveals that a dominant group inevitably describes a subordinate group falsely in terms derived from its own systems of thought”. Focus on the individual sense-making of the marginal from the perspective of the dominant virtually guarantees a diversity literature that passively blames the victim by focusing on what the marginal can do about their marginality.

There are also aspects of marginalization, such as hiring and promotion decisions, which are not merely perceptions of the marginal. Were these issues not largely beyond the control of the marginal, they would not be diversity issues to begin with. A focus on the marginal draws research focus away from the relationships of power which create marginality.

Since diversity issues are primarily enacted at the group level, it is somewhat surprising that only an eighth of the studies focused on this level. Of these, the overwhelming majority focused only on the relationship between group composition and work performance. This is a legitimate topic but one marred by two significant problems. The first, discussed earlier, is a lack of theoretical coherence regarding what counts as group diversity. The second is the triteness of the problematic defined. Organizational reality is primarily a group reality, the place where the individual and the structural intersect. There is so much more to explore at this level than team performance.

The minority of studies (14%) which focused on the organizational level did not complement the group and individual level studies as much as they raised completely different topics. Of primary interest were personnel policy and the connection between diversity or ‘diversity reputation’ and performance. The small portion of studies which addressed the social/structural level of analysis (9%) included almost all of the submissions which identified themselves as poststructuralist, critical or postcolonial. Where other studies included this level, it was primarily about society as a supplier or a market – the effect of diversity on hiring or its effect on sales. This chapter’s findings regarding levels of analysis are summarized in Figure 9.3.

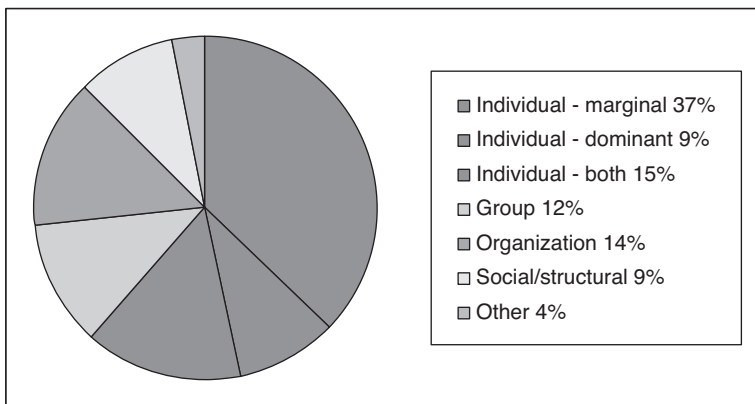


Figure 9.3 Levels of analysis.

Pervasively in this research, organizational reality is treated as something produced by individuals who behave as rational sense-makers. Since the group-, organizational- and social-structural levels are treated as more or less merely aggregations of individual efforts, all of society is treated as the product of such robotic individuals. This is a questionable view in general, but especially in the volatile area of diversity issues. In making the central research object the rational, individual mind, this research silences consideration of the role of either non-rational behavior or social-structural forces in maintaining privilege.

Funeral for a friend

Has 'diversity' become a dead signifier? The idea merits consideration. Terms such as oppression, marginalization, dominance, power, collusion, racism, sexism and privilege are rarely found in this literature. In 'diversity' discourse, everyone is well intentioned and self-determining; there is no battle for scarce resources; malicious intent and wilful ignorance barely exist. One of the central relations of power structuring 'diversity' discourse is the oxymoronic axiom that relations of power are unimportant. It is increasingly impossible within this discourse to say that somebody is getting screwed over.

Empirically, it seems that diversity discourse has settled into a narrow discursive space in which privilege and injustice are increasingly unrepresentable and the central diversity issue is its effect on corporate performance. Admittedly, this does not necessarily reflect the intentions of diversity researchers, many of whom do care about creating a more equitable workplace. Still, the largely unquestioned discursive boundaries of 'diversity' discourse make it a vehicle that does not go where most critical scholars would wish to take it.

One important contributor to this problem is a near universal failure to question what Burrell & Morgan (1979:105) refer to as "abstracted empiricism." As they explain:

[A]bstracted empiricism represents a situation in which a highly nomothetic methodology is used to test a theory which is based upon an ontology, an epistemology and a theory of human nature of a more subjectivist kind.

(Burrell & Morgan, 1979: 105)

Even the primarily Empiricist literature reviewed in this chapter has defined diversity as a constructed problematic, yet for 96% of the studies reviewed, social construction was a problem to transcend. The problem is recognized to be grounded in human perception; to have no objective basis apart from human consciousness; to be dynamic; to be influenced by the group, organizational and social context – but this in no way tempers the blind Empiricist belief that enough hypothesis testing will lead eventually to positive knowledge. Restricting the discourse to that which can be expressed as a statistically significant difference removes most of what matters from the phenomena studied. It also conveniently facilitates the kind of diversity discourse that an African-American colleague described to me several years ago when she referred to a particular diversity consultant as, "Making a quarter-million dollars a year telling white people what they want to hear."

Might a discourse of 'marginality' as an alternative discourse of difference better support progressive change? If a precondition of change is to state that some people are being treated unfairly, this seems increasingly necessary. The following questions and comments are offered as examples of topics which might interest a scholar of marginality but which have not been represented in the literature reviewed in this study. These are not tested propositions but plausible topics we might investigate more vigorously if we took the questioning of unfair privilege seriously:

- What general social relationships define marginality and diversity, regardless of the specific signifier through which they operate?
- How does affirming the identity of the marginal automatically undermine the entrenched self-interest of the dominant and produce resistance?
- What are the dynamics of the social pressures which push dominant identities together and marginal identities apart?
- Where are the voices of the Others in diversity research? The marginal cannot be fairly represented except in their own voices, and there are such voices in the literature – feminism, Afrocentric theory, postcolonial theory, *Ubuntu*, *kaupapa Maori*. Where are they in theory?
- It seems that, overall, marginal people are not uniformly better human beings, nor are the dominant merely evil, yet harm is done and privilege is experienced. What forces make this so?
- What are the overall and long-term consequences to the individual and to society of denying voice and dignity?
- How does privilege reproduce itself in a manner that is more or less transparent to the privileged?
- How do we understand the observable fact that those who possess marginal demographics do not necessarily act in solidarity with their demographic?
- How do the dynamics of ‘getting ahead’ reinforce the dynamics of dominance and marginality?
- How is marginality a source of blindness, as well as insight? How is the same true of dominance?
- To what extent is ‘maturity’ socialized behaviour? Cultures which appear ‘childlike’ to the observer may illustrate more about the observer’s construction of maturity than about the deficiency of the Other. How can Western maturity be “anthropologized” as Rabinow (1986) suggests?
- What conflicts are associated with finding a meaningful place within the mainstream while simultaneously honouring a cultural heritage linked to marginality?
- What are the limits of pluralism (there is only one CEO, only one personnel policy . . .)?
- Given that the status quo is a production of dominant culture and that dominant culture values are embedded in ‘excellent’ management practice as well as in ‘rigorous’ research practice, how is equal access to the status quo is still not equitable to those of other backgrounds?
- How are the same stories told about the marginal (dirty, childlike, stupid, sexual and lazy) worldwide, regardless of the marker of marginality?
- Since marginality is everywhere linked to poverty, what is the place of social class membership in the study of diversity?
- What are the dynamics of ignorance? How does it operate to reproduce marginality? How does exclusion from the *savoir faire* required to move out of lower-status work (or unemployment) perpetuate privilege? How does ignorance result in unintentional collusion of the marginal with the dominant?

‘Diversity’ is an exhausted signifier

All these questions make up merely a sampler, but in them one can see that most of the terrain we could have explored in diversity research remains terra incognita. Mere acknowledgement of power relationships and inequity is impolite. This is analogous to petroleum scientists excluding the study of carbon. Myriad differences have been tabulated as markers of diversity, but mere difference is not inherently a diversity issue. Virtually all of the research reviewed measures one

or more demographic differences without theorizing the relations of power that create privilege and marginality around that difference. As ‘diversity’ erodes into ‘demographics’, we are now all equally ‘diverse’. The notion of inequity which motivated the old blacks-in-management and women-in-management research has been lost.

Whatever the axis of difference, just two things dependably determine which social differences will count as diverse – *membership* and *knowledge*. The dominant are members of the group with disproportionate power; the marginal are not, and they are labeled as such. Additionally, the dominant disproportionately learn to negotiate the relationships of power which lead to successfully turning dominant group membership into social privilege; the marginal not only do not have this opportunity but the ‘common sense’ within which they are raised is counterproductive in this regard. It follows that the antidote to privilege and marginality is *inclusion* and *education* – but not merely at the company level; both are general social issues relevant from cradle to grave. How do we develop a coherent body of theory around these two relationships, one which can inform progressive social action? To date, progress has been worse than disappointing in the organizational ‘diversity’ literature.

When the idea for this chapter first took shape several years ago, the working title was ‘Toward a General Theory of Diversity’. The goal was to argue for a need to abstract from specific cases and analyze general fault lines of difference, to move from research fragmentation to more general theoretical models. One of the surprises of this research has been to find that such models are emerging, in social identity theory, in network analysis – some research even speaks specifically of “fault line analysis”. Ironically, however, in such analysis, what gets lost is the fact that somebody is getting cheated and hurt, which was the motivating issue for this research area in the first place. No. What is needed is not merely abstracted general theory but general theory which remains connected to the pain and suffering of being short-changed in life.

Summing up, as diversity research has coalesced, three congenital and fatal flaws have become boundary conditions of this research. That is, they are not simply common; they are conditions of credibility:

- 1 *Lack of theory*: The field is moving away from, not closer to, coherent theories regarding the dynamics of privilege and marginality, despite a plethora of available models in the allied social sciences.
- 2 *Methodolatry*: The ability to speak of complex phenomena, values or emotions, which are all central to the dynamics of privilege and marginality, is fatally hampered by near universal acceptance among researchers of methods which involve statistical hypothesis testing, computation and therefore simplistic models and either/or findings. Refusal to accept the inadequacy of the generic employee has cost diversity research the ability to say very much of importance.
- 3 *Co-optation*: To be “within the true” (Foucault, 1970) of diversity discourse, one must treat organization members as people of good will. Racists, sexists, bigots, the self-interested and greedy do not exist. Further, one must design one’s research to address diversity as a source of or barrier to competitive advantage rather than as an issue of ethics or justice.

This is not to say that all work using the signifier ‘diversity’ has exhibited these qualities. There are indeed examples of this research which recognize inequities and power relations and argue for change that goes beyond enhancing corporate profitability (see e.g. Prasad, Mills, Elmes & Prasad, 1997). The question this chapter poses is whether the signifier ‘diversity’ is a viable vehicle for achieving these goals or whether it is an exhausted signifier, the very use of which places

research within the Procrustean grip of the status quo. The research reviewed in this chapter is a comprehensive population of all research presented for 10 years within the Gender & Diversity division of the Academy of Management. Given the centrality of this professional organization to management discourse within the American business school, it is a fair claim that these articles represent what can and cannot count as diversity research within that discourse. Further, since American management discourse colonizes business school discourse internationally (through textbooks, magazines, management celebrities, journals, the AACSB etc.; cf. Jacques, 1996), one must question whether there is any significant critical potential for a signifier that has been so thoroughly reduced to serving corporate profitability within that discourse.

For those who wish to decolonize corporatist American management discourse, resist the trivialization of 'identity' into 'demographics' and question inequity, two broad approaches are available. We can attempt to significantly change the discursive boundaries which inform diversity discourse, or we can work under a signifier or signifiers more congenial to our interests. No doubt, there will be some who would argue for the former strategy. They may be right; I doubt it. Only time will tell, but we already have a good deal of evidence suggesting that social change will not come from the 'tempered radicals' of the status quo – more bad-tempered radicals will be needed. After looking at the evidence, I lean in the direction of doing 'marginality' and leaving 'diversity' for the consultants.

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