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Organizational diversity: making the case for contextual interpretivism

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to make a case for contextual interpretivism in managing diversity in organizational settings, specifically in its bearing on internal communication, going against the dominating functionalistic stance of venerated and ubiquitous approaches.

Design/methodology/approach – Qualitative and quantitative methodologies were employed to explore the potential of contextual interpretivism within the mining and construction industries of South Africa, due to the fecund diversity context of its employee population.

Findings – This paper points to the enriched understanding that could result from following a contextual interpretivistic approach to internal communication for diversity management, and in so doing discusses the ways in which this could take hold in organizations through the application of germane theoretical assertions of revered internal organizational communication literature, specifically the excellence theory and communication satisfaction.

Research limitations/implications – The main limitation to this research is the restricted generalizability of its empirical research. Further research is required for the exploration of the central premise in other organizational contexts.

Practical implications – The paper provides insights into the ways in which organizations could approach its diversity management so as to speak to more than just the functional aspects thereof, and rather to the importance of nurturing an understanding of employees' interpretation of the organization's diversity endeavors.

Originality/value – The implications of applying a new approach to diversity management in organizational settings is discussed and argued, offering an empirical application thereof, which gives way to practical, data-driven recommendations for use in organizational settings.

Keywords Mining industry, Construction industry, Diversity management,
Contextual interpretivism, Internal communication, Interpretivism

Paper type Research paper

The diverse diversity

Diversity literature, as it relates to organizational settings is abounding with models and methods offering universal and general guidelines for its management. Notwithstanding their usual normative and descriptive natures, many of these offer only abstract and nonfigurative principles for implementation. This tendency to yield abstract and universal approaches could largely be attributed to the diverse nature of organizational diversity itself – in line with a contingency perspective, there is no single best "fit" or recipe to be followed, no template to be made for strategic diversity management in organizational contexts. By and by, diversity will, from one context to the next, become too diverse for this to materialize.

In the field of internal organizational communication, an ever ubiquitous approach to managing diversity is to make "the business case" for it. Herein, the value of a diverse

This paper is based on a paper presented at the Thirteenth International Conference on Diversity in Organizations, Communities and Nations, in Darwin, Australia in June 2013.

workforce on the organization's bottom line is argued by holding forth that, through active engagement, a diverse population has more value to add to the organizational processes and, by proxy, to its bottom line (cf. Bilimoria, 2000; Cassell, 1997; Herring, 2009; Mease, 2012). Although making the business case for diversity might frame it in an appealing way for organizations, this approach offers only a partial view of employee diversity and could eventually lead to inequitable diversity management in organizations. "The business case," in essence, tends to reduce employees to a resource (Mease, 2012). Obviously, the argument that employees are a valuable resource for the attainment of organizational goals cannot be dissuaded, but organizations need to keep in mind that employees are not objects to be utilized – they are human beings, with names and faces, ambitions and predilections. Basically, therefore, a large body of internal organizational communication literature on diversity management reduces its approach to be functionalistic in nature, where employees and their diversity is seen as simply a function of the organization, ready to be manipulated to serve the goals and their attainment in the organization (cf. Mumby, 2013; Neher, 1997). Rather than reducing diversity management to a function, an interpretivistic perspective should be followed, where an understanding of employees' circumstances in the organizational context should guide its diversity endeavors.

It is once an interpretivistic perspective is followed that the importance of the specific context of an organization becomes evident. More expressly, diversity management from an interpretivistic perspective would focus on the ways in which employees interpret and experience the organizational context, as filtered through their diverse backcloths. From this perspective, it becomes clear that organizations are in a position to wholly or utterly manage diversity only once the experiences of employees within their specific organizational context are understood, in all its diversity.

In this paper this stance will be unpacked, as the importance of the interpretivistic perspective on diversity management will be explored. To this end, the interpretations and experiences of employees within the mining and construction industries of South Africa – which boasts one of the most notoriously diverse employee populations within this country (Holtzhausen and Fourie, 2008; Le Roux and Naudé, 2009) – as it relates to internal organizational communication, will be investigated. The manner in which the internal communication of an organization is experienced by a diverse workforce will offer insights into the importance of an interpretivistic perspective with a contextual approach, when dealing with diversity. True to this approach, the section directly following will contextualize the mining and construction industries of South Africa, focussing on the diversity indicators in this context.

Contextualizing the diversity of South Africa's mining and construction industries

The history of South Africa as a country and that of its mining and construction industries is virtually intertwined (Davenport, 2013; Marks and Trapido, 1979). From its onset, and for over a century, these industries have been a major source of employment for individuals from all around the world, and then specifically southern and central Africa (Steen *et al.*, 1997). Not only did this see the economic establishment of the country, but it also meant that, since inception, these industries have positioned themselves to be as diverse as they are lucrative. So diverse was this populace that no single culture or language was adopted for use by all; rather, these industries acted as a crucible, seeing the "melting together" of diverse cultures and backgrounds to form a new mining and construction culture epitomized, for example, by the mining language, Fanakalo – explained in more detail.

In terms of the diversity features regarding the populace of the South African mining and construction industries, the first diversity indicator is the origins of workers. The profitability of employment in these industries for workers from nearly any educational background is relatively advantageous, given the economic climate of the countries that many of these workers hail from (Davenport, 2013). For many, it is therefore gainful to travel or move a great distance from their place of origin to work in the South African mining or construction industries. From this it is seen that diversity in terms of origins is intensified by the presence of a migrant workforce. Simply put, these are workers who leave their families behind in their places of origins, to work and temporarily live close to the operation or organization they come to work for (Lurie *et al.*, 2003; Meekers, 2000). Typically, these workers would live in hostels owned by the mines, and only go home to their families on "pay weekends," once a month. Origin diversity, inherently in the African context, is predictably accompanied by cultural and language diversity besides – the second and third indicators.

Africa is conventionally culturally diverse, with languages in abundance. Consider, for example, the fact that a third of the world's linguistic heritage is accounted for from this continent (Mous, 2003). This diversity is intensified when as many possible cultures and languages assemble in an organization in these industries. As alluded to before, this diversity is so great that it was less demanding to form a new amalgamated language, than it was to adopt any one of the original languages of the workers. Fanakalo (also spelt Fanagalo), a mainly Zulu-based pidgin language, resultantly developed to promote ease of communication in these industries, by mixing all the various languages spoken into one (Githiora, 2002; Holtzhausen and Fourie, 2008; Le Roux and Naudé, 2009). The intensity of this diversity indicator for the organizational environment is only truly appreciated when it is realized that employees converse in a language that they learned only once they entered the employ of an organization in these industries – and in the case of the African context, would often times be a third or fourth language (Ellis, 2003).

Further intensification of the language diversity in organizations within the mining and construction industries of South Africa ensues with an understanding of the fourth indicator of diversity in this context: literacy. As stated before, the mining and construction industries offer various employment opportunities for unschooled and illiterate workers. For this reason, the Leon Commission for Health and Safety reports that 84 percent of general laborers and machine operators in these industries are functionally illiterate (Stanton, 2003; Creamer, 2002; Leon, 1995). While these industries are obviously vastly populated by these unschooled and/or illiterate workers, the employment of highly educated engineers and the like is also necessary. The diversity of employees in this instance thus sees a continuum of literacy levels from workers who cannot even write their own names to those who are qualified on a postgraduate level.

Coupled with this, is the last main diversity indicator; locality and occupational disparity. On one single "site" or operation for an organization within the mining and construction industries of South Africa, there could be a disparity in terms of locality and occupation ranging from human resources managers in an office building to general workers at the literal, if not figurative, coal face. This manifests as a diversity indicator when it is considered that communication with employees who work in an office, with a telephone and internet access, will differ considerably from communication with an employee who goes underground before the sun rises, and encounters no mediated communication channels (save for emergency channels) until he/she "surfaces."

Interpretivistically considering how these diversities impact on employees, and the way that they experience the organization and its endeavors, offers a holistic understanding of

diversity; and so doing puts the organization in a better position to manage this diversity than if it were considered only from a functionalistic perspective. In the section following directly below, the role of internal organizational communication in adhering to this interpretivistic perspective will be discussed, pointing to its pertinence in this context.

Walk a mile in my shoes: interpetivism and internal communication

Before organizations are in any position to formulate and implement diversity management programs that aspire to be successful, they first need to understand the diverse nature of their workforce (Le Roux and Naudé, 2009; Leonard and Stöh, 2000). This task, more often than not, falls to organizational communicators due to their boundary spanning roles and internal environmental scanning charge (Leonard and Stöh, 2000). The problem, as touched upon above, is that the understanding of diversity within an organization is consistently done from a functionalistic perspective, which is inherently reductionalistic in nature. Rather than abiding by this recurrent perspective (or its counterparts), diversity management could be enhanced when an interpretivistic approach is taken.

Interpretivistic approach in organizational communication

Interpretivism, as framed in this paper, hails from a social constructivist perspective; the fundamental assertion of which is encapsulated by Lakoff (1987, p. 261) when stating:

> We are not outside of reality. We are part of it, *in* it. What is needed is not an externalist perspective, but an internalist perspective. It is a perspective that acknowledges that we are organisms functioning as part of reality and it is impossible for us to ever stand outside it.

Gergen (1985, p. 266) condenses this sentiment and states that "[w]hat we take to be experience of the world does not in itself dictate the terms by which the world is understood," as these terms by which the world is understood is rather constructed by means of social artifacts, by products of historically situated interchanges among people (Gergen, 1985, p. 267). This constructed understanding prevails, and is perpetuated, not due to the empirical or observable accuracy thereof, but rather due to the fluctuation of social processes.

Herein, interpretivism as an approach to organizational functioning realizes that employees are not merely rational beings, whose behavior can be predicted and expectantly controlled or managed – they construct a reality based on their understanding of a situation, which is born from their values, beliefs and inimitable reactions to the situations and contexts they find themselves in (Neher, 1997; Yanow and Ybema, 2009). Those following an interpretivistic approach in organizational settings would thus endeavor to discover and comprehend the understanding and meaning created by these individuals, and in so doing seek to understand the social context in which this meaning is produced (Neher, 1997; Yanow and Ybema, 2009). Simply put, an interpretivistic approach would attempt to holistically (rather than reductionalistically) understand the context of the organization, as understood by the individuals in that organization. It is thus only once the context is understood, that employees and their understanding of it can be understood in turn.

Following an interpretivistic perspective on understanding diversity would holistically consider the specific circumstance of the organization's context, and how this features and permeates into the diversity situation of the organization. Interpretivists in this instance would realize that diversity in organizational settings is much more than an individual's skin color or sex, it is rather also their situation and their understanding of

that situation or context as influenced by their diversity and the diversity this creates in their version of constructed reality. In the field of organizational communication literature, two predominant theories emerge, that have an interpretivistic slant to internal communication for employee diversity management. These are by names the excellence theory and satisfaction literature.

The excellence theory

Germane aspects of the excellence theory centers on shared expectations; a participative culture; two-way symmetricality of internal communication and equal opportunity for diversity. For shared expectations, it is argued that communicators in the organizational setting need to act in a boundary-spanning capacity, gathering and interpreting information from employees in order to wittingly council management about employee needs, and vice versa (Kuch, 2010; Okura *et al.*, 2009; Dozier *et al.*, 1995). Herein, internal communication contributes to diversity management, by ensuring that there is a sense of shared expectations between the organization and its diverse employee corps.

Cultivating shared expectations in the organization, lays the groundwork for a participative culture. In terms of communication excellence, it is appreciated that organizational cultures are as unique as the differing organizations from which they hail. Yet it is found that they are not idiosyncratic in their uniqueness due to the fact that two kinds of organizational cultures are differentiated: participative and authoritarian (Dozier *et al.*, 1995). Participative cultures are seen as being open to ideas from employees and the organizational context, to promote equality and teamwork as well as empowerment by means of shared decision-making, with the authoritarian culture being the antithesis in each aspect.

Both shared expectations and a participative culture can only be realized if the organization implements two way symmetrical communication, where the focus is on receiving information as much as it is on sending it. The symmetricality of the communication would be reliant on organizations reacting to the communication from employees, and implementing that into the functioning of the organization (Kuch, 2010; Okura *et al.*, 2009). Lastly, within the participative and two-way nature of the communication, equal opportunity should be afforded for diversity, not only within the communication of the organization, but also on operational levels (Dozier *et al.*, 1995).

Communication satisfaction

Where the excellence theory concerns itself with the managerial aspects of communication, satisfaction focusses on the manner in which the communication messages sent are received and interpreted by employees within the organization. Germane to diversity management, satisfaction literature focusses on the perceptions of employees regarding the communication climate of the organization. Communication climate, in its general encapsulation, refers to the perceptions that employees hold with regard to the quality of the mutual relations and the communication (events, activities and behaviors) within the internal environment of an organization, which inspires inferences of the predispositions held by the organization (Hemmert, 2009; Eisenberg and Riley, 2001). The communication climate dimension of satisfaction tends to reflect on employees' satisfaction with regard to the general aspects of organizational communication – the general perception that the communication of the organization creates in its diverse workforce is thus reflective of the organization's communication climate (Downs and Hazen, 1977).

The methodology of the empirical exploration

To explore the importance of a contextual interpretivistic approach, rather than just an interpretivistic approach to internal communication for diversity management, the empirical part of this study researched instances of internal organizational communication in the South African mining and construction industries, as it applies to diversity management. To this end, the empirical research of this study was undertaken at two organizations, both seated within the mining and construction industries of South Africa. First, the Gautrain project was selected, which, notwithstanding its mining operations including underground tunneling, is seated mainly within the construction industry of the country. Second, Diesel Power Opencast Mining (DPOM) was selected, which as its name implies, is mainly a mining organization, which peripherally focusses on construction, such as civil engineering projects.

As this paper has as focus an interpretivistic approach to diversity management, it would naturally follow that the ontological and epistemological orientations of such an approach would allow for qualitative methodologies to be employed. In this research, qualitative data-gathering techniques were indeed engaged in, in the form of interviews and focus groups as it allowed for a deeper understanding into the way in which employees constructed the reality of the organizational setting, as it pertains to diversity within this setting. Further to this, however, quantitative methodologies – specifically questionnaire surveys – were also employed. At first, this might seem at odds with the interpretivistic perspective that underlies the study, but the reason for its use is due to the diverse nature of the employee population of the organizations: ironically in keeping with the social constructivist and interpretivistic perspectives' view of a collectively and socially constructed subjective reality, which is potentially as diverse as the population itself is, the empirical exploration had to make allowance for a large and diverse response as well. Although the ideal would be to hold qualitative interviews or focus groups with a large amount of employees, this was not deemed feasible in the context of this study. Rather therefore, the quantitative measurement of surveys was employed, as it allows for a greater response across a multitude of respondents.

At both of these organizations, therefore, explorative qualitative interviews with the managers responsible for the applicable internal organizational communication were first held, which amassed to four in-depth semi-structured and semi-standardized interviews. Due to the semi-structured nature of the interviews, standardized as well as follow-up questions were included. The standardized questions were structured, based on the main themes identified in literature, which also served as the categories for interpretation, by means of a thematic content analysis (after Keyton, 2006, p. 276). The interviews – all of which were conducted by the author – were transcribed from the Dictaphone recording so as to aid in the thematic categorization, which is used as the main headings in the findings section of this paper. This was followed by quantitative surveys under the employee populations of both organizations, where the questionnaire items for this survey focussed on the theoretical aspects as discussed above, as well as contextual aspects that could impact on their effecting. The reliability of these questionnaire items were tested by means of the Cronbach's α method. This method can be described as a coefficient of reliability, as it measures how well a set of questions measure a single variable (Roberts *et al.*, 2006, p. 44). Although the sampling method employed in both cases falls under the category of probability sampling, and although a relatively respectable response rate for these surveys were experienced, findings are not generalizeable to the entire population of these organizations, as the sampling error was not kept to under 5 percent (Keyton, 2006). The main reason for this was that management of both organizations did not want their

production to be interrupted by the surveying, and fewer employees than what would have been the ideal were included. Herein, at the Gautrain project (the bigger of the two organizations) 281 completed surveys could be used, and at DPOM 73. Due to the fact that this explorative study did not seek to make generalizations to this effect, this was deemed acceptable.

Finally, following the quantitative questionnaires and their statistical interpretation, three focus groups with 34 employees in total from the Gautrain project (management of DPOM did not grant access to their employees for focus groups), were held. These employees were selected by means of volunteer sampling, and offered an in-depth qualitative understanding of, not only the same aspects that the interviews with managers focussed on, but also on interesting aspects gleaned from the quantitative questionnaires. Once again, as was the case with the interviews, the focus group discussions were transcribed and ordered according to thematic categorizations gleaned from literature. Different from the interviews, however, the focus groups observer error was limited by making use of inter-rater reliability. According to Gravetter and Forzano (2006, p. 75) this refers to the exclusion of observer error by making use of more than one observer to simultaneously record measurements of the same phenomena. Therefore, for the focus groups, the help of two extra observers were called in (excluding the author as moderator). Employing all three forms of data-gathering resulted in data triangulation (Brewer and Hunter, 2006; Keyton, 2006), and also saw the exploration of the research phenomenon simultaneously from the perspective of management – responsible for the dissemination of internal communication – as well as employees' interpretation upon receiving it.

Findings

In keeping with the social constructivist perspective, and then the interpretivistic approach therein, the empirical methodological exploration had to focus on a diverse group of participants (as discussed above). As seen in Table I below, a general (if not statistical) representation of diversity was realized in terms of the basic demographics of participants.

The viewpoints of these participants, as manifest in the qualitative and quantitative data will now be unpacked, as they relate to the specific assertions and themes gleaned from literature.

Two way symmmeticality for a participative culture with shared expectations

The first three theoretical indicators of the excellence theory go hand-in-hand, as two-way symmetrical communication gives way to a participative culture wherein all employees have input into the organizational communication system, and the opportunity is created for them to share and disclose. This allows for shared expectations, as opposed to disparate expectations or goals concerning diversity management, by both the organization and its employees.

First, in the qualitative interviews, managers were asked whether they feel that there is two-way symmetricality in their communications to employees; that there is a relative balance between the amount of information sent and the amount received in terms of diversity management. All four managers interviewed were of the opinion that there is indeed opportunity to send information, although it is somewhat of an idealized stance to say that the communication sent to employees should be equal to the amount received. Two reasons were given for this: first, all four of the managers agreed that the communication channels, whether they make provision for upward or downward

Organization: Gautrain project

Gender

Male: 95% ($n = 267$)		Female: 5% ($n = 14$)	

Age

Younger than 20: 2.1% ($n = 6$)	20-29: 13.6% ($n = 38$)	30-39: 38.6% ($n = 108$)	40-49: 7.5% ($n = 21$)	50-59: 37.5% ($n = 105$)	60 and older: 0.7% ($n = 2$)

Classification

Asian: 0.7% ($n = 2$)	Black: 85.9% ($n = 237$)	White: 4.3% ($n = 12$)	Colored: 9.1% ($n = 25$)

Job level

Operator: 84.6% ($n = 237$)	Supervisor: 12.5% ($n = 35$)	Middle management: 0% ($n = 0$)	Management: 2.9% ($n = 8$)

Education – highest qualification

None: 4.3% ($n = 12$)	Primary school/ABET 1-3: 9.4% ($n = 26$)	High school/ABET 9: 74.6% ($n = 206$)	Tertiary: 8.7% ($n = 24$)

Organization: DPOM

Gender

Male: 91.8% ($n = 67$)		Female: 8.2% ($n = 6$)	

Age

Younger than 20: 1.4% ($n = 1$)	20-29: 23.9% ($n = 17$)	30-39: 46.5% ($n = 33$)	40-49: 16.9% ($n = 12$):	50-59: 11.3% ($n = 8$)	60 and older: 0% ($n = 0$)

Classification

Asian: 2.9% ($n = 2$)	Black: 78.6% ($n = 55$)	White: 1.4% ($n = 1$)	Colored: 17.1% ($n = 12$)

Job level

Operator: 76.1% ($n = 54$)	Supervisor: 4.2% ($n = 3$)	Middle management: 11.3% ($n = 8$)	Management: 8.5% ($n = 6$)

Education – highest qualification

None: 1.4% ($n = 1$)	Primary school/ABET 1-3: 9.9% ($n = 7$)	High school/ABET 9: 59.2% ($n = 42$)	Tertiary: 29.6% ($n = 21$)

Table I.
Employee
demographics

communication, is still controlled by the organization, and as the onus of responsibility for internal communication still falls primarily to the organization, it is not entirely realistic to expect employees to communicate as much upwardly in the organization, as the organization communicates downwardly to them. In the second instance, although the organization might encourage employees to make use of the channels designed for feedback or upward communication, employees mostly have "to go out of their way" to make use of these channels. One manager remarked that, because employees have to "go out of their way" to communicate about diversity or make recommendations regarding its effecting, a lot of the diversity communication sent upward pertains to problems that need to be solved. Herein, the upward communication is less of a participative conversation and more a request for intervention, when employees feel

out of their depth. Basically, therefore, communicating upwardly to management in the organization is viewed as a last resort, rather than a first retort – not exactly the ideal when a participative culture is the aim. Still, all four managers were of the opinion that the expectations regarding diversity management in their organizations is fully shared by employees.

In the quantitative questionnaires, supervisors, who often act as buffers or intermediaries between management of the organization and the general employee corps, were asked to what extent they feel that their subordinates in the organization feel free to supply them with information in this regard. As can be seen in Table II below, generally supervisors in both organizations feel that their subordinates are indeed uninhibited to communicate freely with them in this vein.

Employees, however, were not as positive. As summarized in Table III, it is clear that employees are not quite as affirmative in their opinion of two way symmetrical communication and its outcomes, with most cumulative responses being negative.

When asked about this aspect in the focus groups, employees reiterated what managers said in their interviews, especially the fact that employees have to go out of their way when wanting to communicate upwards, and thus seldom do so and only then as a last resort. Two interesting aspects from a contextual interpretivistic vantage

	Gautrain project	DPOM
Very dissatisfied	5.4% ($n=3$)	5% ($n=1$)
Dissatisfied	25% ($n=14$)	0 ($n=0$)
Satisfied	53.6% ($n=30$)	65% ($n=13$)
Very satisfied	16.1% ($n=9$)	30% ($n=6$)

Table II.
Supervisor's perception of subordinates' uninhibited upward communication

	Gautrain project	DPOM		Gautrain project	DPOM
This organization really listens to what I have to say			*Managers at every level make great efforts to keep in touch with everyone below them*		
Totally disagree	19.2% ($n=54$)	14.3% ($n=10$)	Totally disagree	43.1% ($n=121$)	13.7% ($n=10$)
Disagree	53% ($n=149$)	21.4% ($n=15$)	Disagree	22.1% ($n=62$)	17.8% ($n=13$)
Agree	23.1% ($n=65$)	44.3% ($n=31$)	Agree	26.3% ($n=74$)	37.0% ($n=27$)
Totally agree	4.6% ($n=13$)	20% ($n=14$)	Totally agree	8.5% ($n=24$)	31.5% ($n=23$)
I believe this organization takes my opinions into account			*There is a genuine conversation between the workforce and management*		
Totally disagree	47.3% ($n=133$)	19.2% ($n=14$)	Totally disagree	45.2% ($n=127$)	2.8% ($n=2$)
Disagree	20.3% ($n=57$)	13.7% ($n=10$)	Disagree	18.9% ($n=53$)	12.5% ($n=9$)
Agree	26.7% ($n=75$)	49.3% ($n=36$)	Agree	27.4% ($n=77$)	54.2% ($n=39$)
Totally agree	5.7% ($n=16$)	17.8% ($n=13$)	Totally agree	8.5% ($n=24$)	30.6% ($n=22$)
I believe this organization takes my needs into account			*When I interact with the organization, I have some control over the situation*		
Totally disagree	49.5% ($n=139$)	22.2% ($n=16$)	Totally disagree	12.8% ($n=36$)	11.1% ($n=8$)
Disagree	25.6% ($n=72$)	9.7% ($n=7$)	Disagree	23.1% ($n=65$)	12.5% ($n=9$)
Agree	21% ($n=59$)	44.4% ($n=32$)	Agree	58% ($n=163$)	55.6% ($n=40$)
Totally agree	3.9% ($n=11$)	23.6% ($n=17$)	Totally agree	6% ($n=17$)	20.8% ($n=15$)

Table III.
Employees' perception of symmetricality of communication

point arose from the focus groups, however; aspects that could largely account for the
fact that employees do not feel emboldened to make use of upward communication
channels in terms diversity in the organization.

Two of the three focus groups spoke to the first aspect, but the second focus group
truly promulgated the issue. The issue itself is that employees, in some instances,
do not make use of upward communication channels for aspects regarding diversity in
the organizational environment, as they do not want to appear disrespectful when
basically telling management that they do not really understand the diverse situations
of their employees. Giving a concrete example, one employee stated:

> One time we reached a very good safety record for the month, and management said that the
> whole workshop, everyone, will get a safety prize. After, like, a week maybe, they said to us,
> you will all get a small TV for yourselves. So some of the guys were saying: *What must I do
> with a TV? I do not have electricity at home. They should not give me a TV,* […] *Who will want a
> TV when they can give us vouchers or something, even a chicken that we can do something with*
> […] but then no-one said anything, because it is a gift, and management, management will
> maybe not understand what it is. So, we all took our TVs and said thank you.

An organization that takes an interpretivistic contextual approach to the management
of their diverse employee corps would be au fait with aspects such as these. Here it is
seen how something that was intended to be a positive reinforcement from the
organization was actually perceived negatively and possibly served in expanding a
diversity divide within the organization, rather than bridging it.

The second aspect herein, also speaks to the importance of interpretivistically
understanding the context of the organization and how this impacts on the manner in
which employees experience it. The third and last focus group predominantly
comprised female employees who work on production sites. These participants offered
yet another explanation for the scant use of upward communication channels and
stated that, within the mining and construction industry, being able to "stand your
ground" and be just as competent as anyone else, is very important. For a female
employee, this is even more necessary. Therefore, few female employees, in their
opinion, would make use of an official upwards communication channel to inform
management of a problem, as they feel this might lead to managers doubting their
abilities or aptitude to fulfilling their obligations, due to the fact that they are female.
Rather than informing management that they are being treated differently because
they are female, they would try to manage the situation without management's
knowledge, in the hopes that the situation will better. Management, in most cases,
would be none the wiser as to this diversity problem.

Equal opportunity for diversity and a supportive communication climate
At the basis of most diversity management endeavors in organizational settings is the
ambition of offering equal opportunity for diversity – that all employees have equal
treatment, so as to jettison bias or prejudices. Internal organizational communication
literature supports this, and states that the overall communication climate should
reflect and augment this.

In the qualitative interviews with the managers at the two organizations researched,
the problem with implementing this ideal was raised from the onset. In terms of
offering equal opportunity for diversity, the issue was mooted that this is easier
said than done. One manager commented on the fact that South African legislation
does not leave a whole lot of room for movement on the issue of equal opportunity

for diversity, but that the mining and construction industries has a culture that often works differently from this. Specifically, the fourth manager interviewed stated:

When you need to decide who to make a *team leader*, you are now not supposed to discriminate against someone because they are young, yet the team wants someone who they can look up to, they want someone who they can say: *Yes, he is a maningi badge* – that is someone who has a lot of experience and can do a lot of things, he is a *maningi badge*, you see. So you can know from even before you make a young person a team leader, they [the team] will not listen to him. However, it is the same the other way around also, sometimes a foreman has to identify someone to be a safety rep [safety representative within the workforce] and you are supposed to give everyone equal treatment, but then a safety rep needs to be able to fill out a checklist or so, so the foreman will say *Take that one – he can write.*

In the same vein, the quantitative questionnaires also asked about equal treatment and a communication climate that supports it. As can be seen in Table IV, respondents were fairly negative regarding aspects of equal treatment and opportunity, yet in terms of communicating over diversity boundaries (Table V), respondents were inversely fairly positive.

Further to this, all three focus groups agreed that the mining and construction industries are inherently diverse, so one does not have a choice but to communicate over diversity boundaries. Equal opportunity and treatment of diversity, however, is another matter. All three focus groups indicated that there is no such thing in organizations in these industries, and doubted that there is any organization where there is complete equal treatment. Still, many participants highlighted the fact (very closely aligned to points management raised) that within the mining and construction industries there are different expectations regarding equal treatment. One participant, working on a construction site commented:

When I was working for the mines, there was certain people who did certain work. They would see a Xhosa, and they would say, him, he is a leader. Then they would see a Mashangaan and they would say he is for the machine [drilling machine] and so. It is how it was.

Understanding these kinds of aspects – what Le Roux and Naudé (2009) refer to as "historical baggage" – is what contextual interpretivism propounds. Perhaps somewhat

| | Everyone has equal treatment, regardless of race color, sex or creed | | This organization treats me fairly and just | |
	Gautrain project	DPOM	Gautrain project	DPOM
Totally disagree	54.1% (n = 152)	20.5% (n = 15)	17.1% (n = 48)	15.5% (n = 11)
Disagree	16.7% (n = 47)	23.3% (n = 17)	45.9% (n = 129)	11.3% (n = 8)
Agree	23.5% (n = 66)	26% (n = 19)	32.7% (n = 92)	46.5% (n = 33)
Totally agree	5.7% (n = 16)	30.1% (n = 22)	4.3% (n = 12)	26.8% (n = 19)

Table IV.
Equal opportunity

(Note: "Totally disagree", "Disagree", "Agree", "Totally agree" repeated under the second heading columns as well)

	Gautrain project	DPOM
Totally disagree	9.6% (n = 27)	5.5% (n = 4)
Disagree	15% (n = 42)	9.6% (n = 7)
Agree	63.2% (n = 177)	43.8% (n = 32)
Totally agree	12.1% (n = 12)	41.1% (n = 30)

Table V.
Comfortable communicating over diversity boundaries

more perturbing, a female participant in the third focus group held commented on the fact that equal opportunity for diversity comes at a very high price, and stated:

> If you think about being a leader in a team that is going underground. Then? Then there is nowhere where a woman can go to the bathroom underground. All the men go in front of one another, but a woman? What will happen if a woman does that underground? No it is not safe to be a woman, the only woman then in a team with men underground.

A second woman then elaborated:

> Yes, but even on the site [referring to the construction site where she works] it is not safe like this. It is a problem to even go into these bathrooms [portable toilet] because the men will even follow you. They might want to put a woman in a team alone, but it could be that it is not the best thing.

Practical implications and conclusions
In the findings as outlined above, it is clear that the contextual interpretivistic understanding of the diversity situation is so much more meaningful than the management thereof as merely a function of the organization. A contextual interpretivistic understanding yields more accurate information about the diversity context, allowing for more faithful and meaningful management strategies.

Manifest in an organization, this would entail three practical implications:

First, two-way symmetricality in organizational communication is held forth as an ideal in diversity management, as it allows employees to send information and feedback to management regarding issues of diversity within the organization. Management, it is supposed, will then be in a better position to formulate strategies that take the diverse needs of its employees into account. The practical implication seen in the findings of this article, however, would see a recommendation that two way symmetrical communications not be used singularly for the sending of information, but rather for the maintaining of a two way conversation. The focus of this form of communication should not be on employees offering information and recommendations, but rather on having conversations regarding the working context, for an understanding that will enlighten all other available information. The communication channels employed for this two way conversation should also not be cumbersome for employees to utilize, as they are then less likely to engage.

Second, it is clear that current functions and processes are not the only aspects that shape employees' understanding of diversity in the context of their organizations. The historical aspects ingrained in the culture of an organization can have just as big an effect as extant aspects. In the practical organizational circumstance, it should be realized that only understanding wielded from a contextual interpretivistic perspective will offer insights into attributes such as these, which could potentially shape, guide and gauge diversity management within organizations.

Lastly, literature is abounding with established and supported theoretical statements and recommendations regarding organizational communication ideals for diversity management. From a contextual interpretivistic perspective it is seen that not all of these solutions and statements can be diametrically implemented. For example, as was seen in terms of equal opportunity for diversity for female employees, an understanding of the context of the organization should feature prominently in decisions of implementation of theoretical ideals.

In summary, contextual interpretivism seeks to understand the diversity context of an organization in a holistic manner, rather than reducing it to austere functions. It should be realized that behind the management and strategies for diversity in an

organization are people whose perception of this phenomenon guides and gauges its success to a considerable degree. Diversity management from a contextual interpretivistic perspective should therefore focus on the ways in which employees interpret and experience the organizational context, as filtered through their diverse backcloths. From this perspective, it becomes clear that organizations are only in a position to wholly or utterly manage diversity once the collectively constructed experiences of employees within their specific organizational context are understood, in all its diversity.

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