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Understanding approaches to managing diversity in the workplace
An empirical investigation in Italy

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to enhance understanding of why and how companies implement diversity management in practice, and of factors that may explain their approach.

Design/methodology/approach – This study takes inspiration from existing typologies depicting organisation-wide perspectives on diversity management, and articulates them in more detail by applying practice-driven indicators and highlighting possible contingent factors at play. The resulting framework is used to investigate diversity management in Italy. Data from a survey conducted among 90 companies and two focus groups with experts and managers are presented.

Findings – The most common approach among Italian companies focuses on addressing social expectations, seemingly shaped by isomorphic pressures and the need to secure legitimacy in their environment. Results also point to an understanding and practice of diversity management in Italy that also incorporate compliance and opportunity-oriented aspects, in an interplay between coercion and voluntarism that reflects local perspective and priorities.

Originality/value – This study makes an effort to address the paucity of studies linking approaches to managing diversity with managerial interventions and contextual factors. The research model connecting approaches with practice-driven aspects and explanatory factors shows descriptive and predictive potential, although it should be contextualised to the specific setting under investigation. This study also fills a research gap in Italy, where existing research primarily involves case studies and qualitative approaches and focuses on gender issues. Implications for research and practice drawn from this study can be useful to scholars and practitioners in other countries.

Keywords Equal opportunities, Legitimacy, Italy, Corporate social responsibility, Diversity management

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

The changing demographic composition of the workforce, the expectations of ethical conduct, plus the pressure from a global marketplace (Simons, 2002) are compelling more and more organisations to deal with employee diversity. Theory and empirical research on diversity management are increasingly needed (Shore *et al.*, 2009; Olsen and Martins, 2012), especially from outside the USA, where most studies have been developed so far (Omanović, 2009; Jonsen *et al.*, 2011). This study makes an effort to address this lack of research, and especially the paucity of studies linking approaches

to managing diversity with managerial interventions and contextual factors (Jonsen
et al., 2011; Podsiadlowski *et al.*, 2013), with the purpose to enhance understanding of
why and how companies implement diversity management, and of factors that might
explain their approach.

First, this study takes inspiration from existing typologies that depict organisation-
wide perspectives on managing diversity and articulates them in more detail by
applying practice-driven indicators derived from the literature. The resulting model
offers a deeper understanding of how companies might work with diversity in practice
under a certain dominant perspective. Second, these approaches are linked to factors
that might explain their adoption, i.e. diversity culture, level of internationalisation and
business strategy, and are further discussed in light of isomorphic processes rooted
within the particular macro-national context.

This study also fills a research gap on the European stage and more specifically in
Italy. The number of studies on diversity management in Europe has grown over the
last years (e.g. Süβ and Kleiner, 2008; Klarsfeld, 2009; Tatli, 2011; Podsiadlowski *et al.*,
2013; Janssens and Zanoni, 2014), showing that US lessons are being Europeanised and
that strategies differ from country to country (Jonsen *et al.*, 2011). In Italy, the increased
participation of women and immigrants in the labour market (employment rates being,
respectively, 46.1 and 63.1 per cent, Istat, 2010), and the initiatives inspired by the EU
and multinationals with local offices (De Vita, 2010), have driven the spread of diversity
management as an area of study and practice over the past decade. Gender issues in
particular dominate current academic interest, legislative interventions and societal
debate. Despite this growing attention to diversity, Murgia and Poggio (2014) point out
the possible discrepancy between organisational rhetoric and actual initiatives.
Existing research primarily involves case studies and qualitative approaches, with a
prevalent focus on gender (e.g. Bombelli, 2000; Casarico and Profeta, 2010; De Vita,
2010). All this points to the need for a more comprehensive study on diversity
management in Italian companies.

The paper is structured as follows. First, it draws on existing literature to articulate
approaches to managing diversity by applying practice-driven indicators, and to point
out factors that might explain the selection of approach. Second, it presents research
objectives and methods used to investigate the Italian context. Further, it illustrates
and discusses results on the prevalent approach and factors at play, concluding with
implications and avenues for future research.

Theoretical framework
The origins of diversity management in organisations can be traced back to the 1960s
in the USA (Jonsen *et al.*, 2011), with the advent of equal employment opportunity laws,
followed by affirmative action programmes protecting under-represented minorities.
Workplace diversity research has since then matured as a vast and rich research
field, also within disciplines such as public relations (e.g. Len-Ríos, 1998) and marketing
(e.g. Foster, 2005).

Scholars have tried to grasp the complexity of diversity through the development
of typologies depicting organisation-wide frameworks progressing along a
continuum (Podsiadlowski *et al.*, 2013). Among the most widespread typologies,
Cox (1991) classified organisations from monolithic, to plural, to multicultural, with
an increasing level of presence, integration and engagement of diverse employees.
Similarly, Thomas (1991) presented a three-step evolutionary model encompassing
affirmative action, valuing diversity and managing diversity, with the last stage

recognising the full potential of individuals and addressing issues related to organisational culture and values. Again, Thomas and Ely (1996) contrasted three frameworks, ranging from assimilation to ensure equal treatment under the discrimination-and-fairness perspective, to differentiation to visibly match external diversity under the access-and-legitimacy perspective, to integration to learn from diverse perspectives and change core processes under the integration-and-learning perspective.

Such typologies offer similar conceptual lenses to identify the dominant diversity orientation in an organisation. However, little is known about specific practices that fit a particular perspective (Podsiadlowski *et al.*, 2013). It is therefore meaningful to connect these overarching approaches with practice-driven indicators to facilitate understanding of how companies might work with diversity in practice under a certain dominant perspective. In addition, such indicators disclose the actual diversity approach beyond formal declarations (Olsen and Martins, 2012).

The review of literature allowed for identifying practice-driven aspects of diversity management and categorising them as follows: overall aim of the policy – from regulatory, to ethical, to competitive – (e.g. Lorbiecki and Jack, 2000); the array of diversity dimensions addressed (e.g. Milliken and Martins, 1996); practices including human resources, communication, marketing activities and management structure (e.g. Richard and Johnson, 2001; Jayne and Dipboye, 2004; Shen *et al.*, 2009); benefits (e.g. Cox and Blake, 1991; Robinson and Dechant, 1997; Janssens and Zanoni, 2014) and negative effects encountered (e.g. Milliken and Martins, 1996; Von Bergen *et al.*, 2002).

By keeping a tripartite framework inspired by existing typologies and integrating these with practice-driven indicators, each approach can be articulated in more detail (Table I).

The approach "Assimilating Minorities" aims at ensuring equal opportunities for traditionally under-represented groups and legally protected attributes (e.g. disability).

Approach Indicators	Assimilating minorities	Integrating diversity	Leveraging variety
Aim	Equal opportunities	Social expectations	Competition
Dimensions	Gender, parenthood and disability	Race, nationality, language, religion, sexual orientation, age	Competencies, knowledge, networks
Practices	Quota systems	Flexible working, work-life balance, expansion of the recruitment pool, training, partnerships with dedicated institutions and networks, internal and external communication	Heterogeneous teams, employee networks, diverse suppliers, employment in innovation-related areas, evaluation of policy objectives
Management structure	Barely existent	Dedicated role and planning	Dedicated structure, planning and budget
Benefits	Equity of treatment, reduced lawsuits	Employee motivation, corporate image	Innovation, new markets
Negative effects	Lowering of hiring and promotion standards, negative self-perceptions of competence	Increased conflicts, reverse discrimination	Pigeonholing

Table I.
Articulating approaches to managing diversity: from assimilating minorities, to integrating diversity, to leveraging variety

Quota systems are implemented to increase "diverse workforce and upward mobility for minorities" (Thomas, 1991, p. 28), generally with no other practices or dedicated structure. Benefits arise in terms of fair treatment and diminishing of litigation costs. However, as stressed by Cox (1991), the tendency is toward assimilation, and drawbacks can occur in terms of lowering of hiring and promotion standards, and of negative self-perceptions of competence when minorities feel their employment is attributable to demographic status rather than qualifications.

In the "Integrating diversity" approach, diversity is acknowledged as a reality inside and outside organisations, and companies adopt voluntarily actions to address social expectations. A greater array of socio-demographic features is involved, such as nationality, religion and age, and practices include, for example, the expansion of the recruitment pool, training and communication. A dedicated role is frequently created to plan and coordinate activities. This approach leads to improved employee motivation and corporate image. However, conflicts may arise between employees who do not share the same background, and reverse discrimination may occur because opportunities are devoted only to certain groups.

The "Leveraging variety" approach aims to achieve competitive advantages by drawing, in particular, from the variety of competencies and knowledge-related differences (Andresen, 2007; Janssens and Zanoni, 2014). Practices include, for example, employing heterogeneous teams, or fostering employee linkages for organisational learning. This is coupled with dedicated plan, budget and an organisation-wide management structure. Resulting benefits are increased capacity to innovate and development of new markets. However, as Thomas and Ely (1996) point out, there is a risk that diverse employees are "ghettoized" to more visible positions just to match the diversity of stakeholders and improve the corporate image, which is closer to an "Integrating diversity" perspective. Other research adds that this especially applies to sales, front-office and communication (Robinson and Dechant, 1997; Len-Ríos, 1998), whereas in functions like product development and marketing, employees' contributions are valued to a greater extent in order to enrich solutions and processes (Simons, 2002), which fits into a "Leveraging variety" perspective.

Contingent factors might affect the adoption of one approach rather than another (Shore *et al.*, 2009; Olsen and Martins, 2012). In particular, studies point out that internationalised firms are more likely to exhibit greater levels of diversity, taking advantage of the linguistic and cultural backgrounds of their employees to improve, for example, communication and product adaptation (Robinson and Dechant, 1997). In addition, internationally operating companies are more influenced by the globalisation of management concepts in the adoption of diversity management (Süβ and Kleiner, 2008). It also seems more likely that firms with a growth strategy will adopt diversity management where it fosters flexibility in thinking and innovation capability. Richard and Johnson (2001) contrast companies adopting this strategy, named prospectors, with companies acting as defenders, which pursue stability, limit recruitment and manage diversity to prevent inefficiency and assimilate employees into organisational norms. Analysers represent a combination of prospectors and defenders.

Approaches to managing diversity also vary in terms of maturity of their culture of diversity (Loden and Rosener, 1991) or diversity climate (Herdam and McMillan-Capehart, 2010), indicating the degree to which diversity is progressively incorporated into the corporate culture and managerial values. Nonetheless, in practice companies might not follow a temporal or stage development, typically from compliance to opportunity-oriented approaches. As new institutional theory suggests

(Meyer and Rowan, 1977; DiMaggio and Powell, 1983), companies might aspire to securing legitimacy in their environment. Isomorphic processes, in terms of coercive (e.g. laws and societal expectations), mimetic (e.g. imitation of widespread practices, especially from abroad) and normative (e.g. education) forces external to the organisation, may intervene in shaping diversity management (Süβ and Kleiner, 2008; Klarsfeld, 2009).

The complexity of forces at play is rooted in the particular macro-national context where companies operate (Jonsen *et al.*, 2011). Acknowledging this need for contextualising diversity management, the present study aims to offer a more comprehensive understanding of diversity management in Italy, taking into consideration also the factors that shape organisational approaches.

Research objectives and methods
The research model depicted in Table I forms the basis for this empirical investigation. It is worth mentioning here that a first formulation of the model, with its tripartition and preliminary indicators, was developed in previous research, which included exploratory case studies (Mazzei and Ravazzani, 2008, 2012) and interviews with experts (Ravazzani, 2011). Starting from this original formulation and insights gained through a further extended literature review, the present study has articulated the model in more detail, introduced explanatory factors, and adopted a quantitative strategy for a more extensive investigation of Italian companies.

This study aims to investigate the following research questions:

RQ1. Which approach to diversity management of those included in the research model is the most widespread in Italy?

RQ2. What factors can be associated with the adoption of one approach rather than another?

It is expected that:

H1. Companies with a mature and long-lasting diversity culture (operationalised through the years of implementing the diversity management policy) are more likely to adopt the "Leveraging variety" approach.

H2. Companies with a high level of internationalisation are more likely to adopt the "Leveraging variety" approach.

H3. Companies with a growth-oriented business strategy are more likely to adopt the "Leveraging variety" approach.

To test these hypotheses, the policy aim will function as a dependent variable, since it is a good indicator of the overall approach that underlies diversity management in a company (Thomas and Ely, 1996; Richard and Johnson, 2001).

Data for the present study were collected in 2010 in two stages: a web survey and two focus groups. The survey instrument and items were tested twice with 15 experts from research and practice, who ultimately did not form part of the final sample, in order to ensure validity and reliability through the alternate-forms method (Litwin, 1995). Questions focused on research model indicators (i.e. aim, diversity dimensions, practices, dedicated structure and resources, benefits, side effects) and contingent factors (i.e. diversity culture, internationalisation, business strategy) through multiple-choice items and a six-point scale whose response categories are synthesised in Table II.

Indicators and factors	Response categories	Number of respondents mentioning items (n = 90)
Aim	Addressing social expectations	37
	Ensuring equal opportunities	30
	Increasing capacity to compete	23
Practices	Flexible working	75
	Diversity training	57
	Work-life balance	49
	External partnerships	48
	Expansion of the recruitment pool	45
	Heterogeneous teams	42
	Evaluation of policy objectives	26
	Employee networks	21
	Target quotas	20
	Diverse suppliers	9
	Internal communication	85
	External communication	77
Areas employing diverse people purposely	Sales and front-office	28
	Communication	27
	Marketing	12
	R&D	8
	None	41
Management structure	Yes (e.g. task force, diversity manager role)	52
	No	38
Dedicated planning	Yes (annual or multi-year)	33
	No (absent or general guidelines)	57
Dedicated budget	Yes	25
	No	65
Benefits	Improved employee motivation	78
	Improved corporate image	54
	Increased equity of treatment	41
	Increased capacity for innovation	37
	Development of new markets	5
	Reduced litigation costs	3
	No benefits obtained	0
Side effects	Misunderstandings and conflicts between employees	6
	Employee perception of being discriminated because excluded from practices	4
	Particular categories of employees have been confined to a few areas	4
	Particular categories of employees have been relegated to marginal positions	3
	Selection and career standards have been lowered	1
	Employees hired because of their diversity have little motivation	1
	No side effects encountered	73
Level of internationalisation	Foreign multinational	42
	Italian multinational	30
	Italian national (serving only domestic market)	18

(*continued*)

Table II.
Survey results on
indicators and
contingent factors

Business strategy	Growth – product/market expansion orientation (i.e. prospector)	71
	Mid-range – reactive to environmental stimuli (i.e. analyser)	14
	Stability and efficiency – incremental adjustment (i.e. defender)	5
Years of existence of the policy	1-5	43
	More than 10	20
	6-10	16
	Less than 1	11
Indicators and factors	*Response categories*	*Average score: scale on commitment from 1 (not at all) to 6 (very much)*
Diversity dimensions	Gender	4.7
	Parenthood	4.4
	Competencies	4.4
	Disability	4.0
	Age	3.5
	Nationality	3.4
	Race	3.3
	Language	3.2
	Sexual orientation	2.9
	Religion	2.5

Table II.

To understand what factors might predict the adoption of one approach over another, multinomial logistic regression was used for multivariate analysis, due to the categorical nature of survey responses (Chatterjee and Hadi, 2006).

No database of companies implementing diversity management in Italy exists, and recruitment announcements or formal statements on corporate websites are not reliable markers of actual practice (Olsen and Martins, 2012). Thus, a list of 150 companies was drawn up from various sources (Italian Equal Opportunities Charter, dedicated research institutes, networks, conferences and events on best practices). Companies were contacted by phone, and potential participants identified themselves as those in charge of the policy in their organisation. In total, 113 companies agreed to participate. Eventually, 90 questionnaires were completed (80 per cent response rate). Sample companies belong to different industrial sectors, mainly manufacturing, retail distribution and credit and insurance. The majority are private and large, employing more than 250 employees.

After the survey, two focus groups were conducted. Participants were purposely selected to create a heterogeneous sample including experts, diversity managers who participated in the survey and managers within human resources and internal communication involved in their company diversity management policy. This qualitative method aimed to gain holistic and in-depth insights into participants' knowledge and experiences and, in line with what other researchers have done (e.g. Klarsfeld, 2009), to provide empirical support and a more human aspect to quantitative results. Questions revolved around survey findings and explanatory factors relating also to the macro-national context, with focus groups acting as a form of triangulation (Byers and Wilcox, 1991). Each focus group met for two-and-a-half hours, the first involving ten participants and the second eight. Data were audio-recorded and transcribed to guarantee content validity, integrated with observational

notes and finally content analysed. Categories were developed in interdependency between theory and data. Replications and differences were also sought to confirm, modify or integrate survey findings.

Results on diversity management in Italy

In the following, results related to the research questions of the present study are illustrated. Table II summarises survey responses on research model indicators and contingent factors.

Most widespread approach

These survey results reveal that the most common aim involves addressing internal and external social expectations; followed by ensuring equal opportunities (especially prevalent among companies with a commitment of more than ten years); and improving the capacity to compete (particularly widespread among foreign multinationals). One focus group participant expressed the view that diversity management in Italy is still conceived of and implemented as "a duty, linked to equal opportunity laws or external pressures for responsible practices".

The diversity dimensions with the highest scores are gender, parenthood, competencies and disability, regardless of years of existence of the policy, level of internationalisation and business strategy. The centrality of gender and parenthood discourse in Italy was also discussed in the focus groups. In one participant's words, "the dimensions most actively addressed by companies are related to the specific make-up of the Italian context and its national culture".

Flexible working, training, work-life balance policies and partnerships with external institutions are the most widely adopted practices, regardless of years of existence of the policy, level of internationalisation and business strategy. Focus group participants argued that such practices are "mainly aimed at the welfare of employees", and that there is limited "awareness of the benefits that increasing human resources diversity might have on organisational performance through, for example, better knowledge of markets". Sample companies seem to communicate widely, internally and externally, on diversity. Companies aiming at social expectations largely employ external communication and partnerships. Focus group participants referred to the use of public statements and visible initiatives as efforts to gain "external visibility and legitimacy", but some even talked about "window dressing".

Survey respondents were also asked to indicate the areas where their company strategically places employees to benefit from their differences. This is done in almost half of the companies, regardless of years of existence of the policy, level of internationalisation and business strategy – mainly in sales, front-office and communication functions. Focus group participants stressed that "diverse people are mostly employed at the interface with the markets, where diversity is more naturally present", but this is also done deliberately "to convey a good image of a company committed to diversity".

Other results show a general scarcity of dedicated resources and structure, with the absence of a specific role or function in 42 per cent of companies, planning in 63 per cent and budget in 72 per cent. Companies aiming at ensuring equal opportunities or addressing social expectations, and those that have initiated diversity management more recently, show a greater lack than companies aiming at competition and foreign multinationals. Most focus group participants emphasised that, also in their experience, there is a general lack of "awareness of what competencies

and resources are needed". One expert commented that it seems like "Italian companies do not have a clear idea about what diversity management means in practice".

In the companies surveyed here, the main benefits are improved employee motivation, corporate image and equity of treatment in the workplace, whereas benefits like development of new markets do not occur often and are more frequently found in companies adopting a competition rationale. In the focus groups, the indirect link between employee motivation, external legitimacy and performance was debated. One person said, "people today are the primary tool for competition […] Increased motivation and workplace well-being can in turn improve performance", while another pointed out, "today consumers focus their attention not only on products and services, but also on the internal side of organisations […] This might affect a company's reputation and credibility. Companies are under a magnifying glass". "sono benefici o obiettivi?" Nessun rispondente ha dichiarato di non aver ottenuto alcun beneficio. When it comes to negative effects, the majority of survey respondents state that in their companies there were no drawbacks. The remaining respondents indicated misunderstandings and conflicts between employees, feelings of reverse discrimination and pigeonholing in certain areas or marginal positions.

Responses on contingent factors reveal that 60 per cent of companies have implemented diversity management for less than six years, with a greater percentage among companies of Italian origin. The majority of companies are internationalised and adopt a growth-oriented business strategy.

Factors explaining the choice of approach

The level of association between contingent factors and aims (used as indicators of the overall approach) was first tested through contingency tables. The relationship between diversity culture and aim is significant at the 90 per cent confidence level ($p = 0.093$, $p < 0.1$). However, the equal opportunities aim prevails among companies that have run diversity management for more than ten years (55 per cent), whereas all other cases pursue a social expectations aim. Thus, *H1* is not confirmed, although the relationship between the two variables is significant. The Anche le 30 aziende che vogliono assicurare PO sono equidistribuite. Second, relationship between level of internationalisation and aim is also significant at the 90 per cent confidence level ($p = 0.076$, $p < 0.1$). Foreign multinational companies mainly pursue a competition aim (38 per cent), whereas both national and multinational Italian companies aim primarily to address social expectations, followed by ensuring equal opportunities. Hence, the second hypothesis is partly confirmed with regard to foreign multinationals. Finally, the relationship between business strategy and aim is not significant ($p = 0.493$, $p > 0.05/0.1$), and when examining the distribution of aims by business strategy, the social expectations aim seems to prevail in all cases. Consequently, the third hypothesis is rejected.

Multinomial logistic regression was then carried out based on the significant relationships between aim and the two predictor variables of diversity culture and level of internationalisation (Table III).

Companies with the most cited aim of addressing social expectations (41 per cent of cases), whose widespread adoption seems consistent with the prevalence of other practice-driven indicators within the "Integrating Diversity" approach, were used as the reference group. The regression tested the probability that variations in diversity culture and internationalisation are associated with the adoption of a competition or equal opportunities aim rather than a social expectations aim. Multicollinearity

Model fitting information

Model	Model Fitting criteria −2 Log likelihood	Likelihood ratio tests χ^2	df	Sig.
Intercept only	76.068			
Final	63.027	13.041	4	0.011

Pseudo R^2

McFadden 0.067

Aim of the policy[a]	B	SE	Wald	df	Sig.	Exp(B)	95 % confidence interval for Exp(B) Lower bound	Upper bound
Increasing competition								
Intercept	−3.611	1.184	9.303	1	0.002			
Diversity culture	0.365	0.308	1.407	1	0.236	1.441	0.788	2.635
Internationalisation	0.957	0.420	5.188	1	0.023	2.605	1.143	5.936
Ensuring equal opportunities								
Intercept	−2.111	0.930	5.158	1	0.023			
Diversity culture	0.621	0.283	4.838	1	0.028	1.862	1.070	3.238
Internationalisation	0.171	0.338	0.255	1	0.614	1.186	0.612	2.299

Note: [a]The reference category is: addressing social expectations

Table III.
Multinomial logistic
regression analysis

between the two predictors was excluded ($p = 0.127$, $p > 0.05$). Likelihood ratio tests show that the model fits at the 95 per cent confidence level ($p = 0.011$, $p < 0.05$). The McFadden test shows that the two predictor variables explain 7 per cent of the variance of the dependent variable.

Diversity culture is significant only in relation to the equal opportunities aim ($p = 0.028$, $p < 0.05$). As "Exp(B) = 1.862; Exp(B) > 1", with an increase in the years the policy has been implemented, companies are more likely to adopt an equal opportunities aim rather than a social expectations aim. Internationalisation is significant only in relation to the competition aim ($p = 0.023$, $p < 0.05$). As "Exp(B) = 2.605; Exp(B) > 1", internationalisation affects the probability that companies choose to adopt diversity management to increase their competition ability.

Discussion and conclusion

Findings seem to indicate that the "Integrating diversity" approach is the most common in Italy. Companies principally aim to address social expectations and mainly focus on the traditional, legally protected attributes of gender, parenthood and disability, reflecting their centrality in the social agenda and legislative make-up of Italy. Companies implement practices for employee well-being and integration, accompanied with external partnerships and communication, typically employed to meet the social demand for responsible conduct (Simons, 2002). In the same vein, specific groups are purposely employed in interface functions where the company's commitment to diversity is more visible (Thomas and Ely, 1996; Robinson and Dechant, 1997; Len-Ríos, 1998); this sustains the corporate image in the eyes of stakeholders. Accordingly, the main benefits indicated are related to employee integration and company reputation. Perceived negative effects, systematic evaluation and dedicated resources are scarce, probably because they require a long-term perspective (Robinson and Dechant, 1997), whereas diversity management is a relatively new concept in Italy: more than half of the surveyed companies have run these policies for less than six years. Results on the factors of diversity culture and internationalisation indicate in particular that companies with a more recent commitment, and of Italian origin, place social expectations at the core of their approach.

A key interpretative lens on these findings stems from institutional isomorphism. The similarity in approach to managing diversity and its dissemination in Italy may be ascribed to isomorphic processes. First, mimetic forces in terms of benchmarking and experiences from abroad, also mentioned in focus groups as "lifecycle accelerators" and proved to be a driving influence in other European countries (e.g. Süβ and Kleiner, 2008; Podsiadlowski *et al.*, 2013). Second, coercive pressures in the form of "suggested" actions by the institutional environment (Klarsfeld, 2009), related to the centrality of corporate social responsibility in Italy, also discussed in both focus groups as "the buzzword of the moment". This is new, compared to findings in other European contexts where social expectations were not found that relevant in explaining diversity management approaches compared to legal regulation (e.g. Süβ and Kleiner, 2008; Klarsfeld, 2009; Tatli, 2011).

Another interesting point of discussion emerges when looking beyond the manifest prevalence of the social expectations aspect and considering some unexpected findings. Companies with a more recent commitment have already started with a clear emphasis on social expectations, whereas companies with longer experience focus on, and are more likely to pursue, equal opportunities, which are often the source of these policies

(Jayne and Dipboye, 2004; Shen *et al.*, 2009). Besides, some indicators, like the widespread use of heterogeneous teams and the perceived increased capacity for innovation, reveal that competitive concerns are not completely marginalised.

These results suggest a different understanding of diversity management in Italy, embedded in an interplay between coercion and voluntarism where social expectations are currently privileged without excluding legal or market-based concerns. This clearly points to the centrality of contextual conditions in moulding organisations' approach to managing diversity, and – in particular – of the national macro-system under investigation, an aspect that has been largely overlooked in current research (Jonsen *et al.*, 2011). Besides, it embodies a tendency that might continue to evolve in ways that differ from a temporal or stage progression depicted in existing typologies (Podsiadlowski *et al.*, 2013), influenced instead by social, cultural, institutional and business conditions that intervene in (re)shaping organisational practice (Süβ and Kleiner, 2008; Klarsfeld, 2009). A contextual understanding of diversity management approaches should therefore be favoured over assumptions about time or stage progression and their acritical transposition across national contexts and organisational realities.

Altogether, these considerations reflect the notion that diversity management is a social construction related to the specific time and context of which the actors are part, and that even though national laws and best practices coming from abroad exert an undeniable influence, they are subsequently hybridised and reinterpreted (Omanović, 2009).

The results suggest implications for practice that could be useful across different organisational and national contexts. One implication is that, in order to construct a solid ground for diversity management in a long-term perspective and go beyond a symbolic adoption of legitimised expectations, organisations should clarify concrete initiatives, available resources and accountability in coherence with the specific organisational context and mindful of possible drawbacks. The tripartite model used in this study allowed an accurate detection of the prevalent approach through several practice-based indicators, and a more comprehensive interpretation in light of explanatory factors. Although requiring contextualisation, the model can offer a basic frame of reference to practitioners, who are often left with few concrete guidelines to translate the diversity discourse into corporate practice (Süβ and Kleiner, 2008; Tatli, 2011).

Another important implication concerns moving away from a rigid separation of legal, social and business-oriented motives by taking a more nuanced and complementary view (Kochan *et al.*, 2003; Tatli, 2011). In their conceptual framework called "socially responsible diversity management", Syed and Kramar (2009) have questioned the schism between compliance and opportunity-oriented arguments for managing diversity, which all present limitations when approached separately. Thus, organisations may benefit from a more holistic agenda, where the approach to managing diversity reconciles considerations of different nature and the understanding of the so-called business case reflects the specific socio-cultural system (Jonsen *et al.*, 2011).

This study also has some limitations that pave the way for future research. The non-probability sampling, devised to select companies actually running diversity management programmes, limits the generalisability of survey results to all Italian companies. In addition, although the regression model fits the 95 per cent confidence level, the two predictor variables of diversity culture and internationalisation explain 7 per cent of the variance. Other factors not included in the research hypotheses, like

company size, industry and stock exchange listing, were tested and also found not significant. Therefore, future researchers could search for other possible explanatory factors. On a more general level, additional studies are needed also in other contexts to delve into national specificities and their impact on diversity management approaches and practices.

Further, more in-depth studies in the Italian context could scrutinise whether the larger societal discourse might have produced a "façade of legitimacy" (Meyer and Rowan, 1977). The general lack of evaluation and dedicated resources found in this study, for example, may instil the idea that diversity management is more of a "rationality myth" (Meyer and Rowan, 1977), and reveal a potential gap between discourse and practice of diversity, as research in the UK has uncovered (Tatli, 2011). In this regard, it is recommended to investigate employees' perspective, as "employee perceptions are a more telling indicator of the organisation's actual support for diversity" (Herdam and McMillan-Capehart, 2010, p. 40). Finally, the research could be replicated during a more positive economic cycle, to see whether the results have been influenced by the global economic crisis.

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