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Reflexivity in managing diversity: a pracademic perspective

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to propose reflexivity as a means to managing diversity practice in organizations. Reflexivity enables taken for granted assumptions about identities, roles, perspectives, language, meanings and understandings between managers and employees to be explored and redefined in ways that matter to the people in the workplace. It provides insights and examples from a practitioner perspective while engaged in designing and implementing a managing diversity initiative. In addition, it positions the development of relationships between managers and employees as a key ingredient in managing diversity.

Design/methodology/approach – This paper is based on a *post hoc* qualitative reflexive study of a managing diversity project undertaken by the author as a diversity practitioner.

Findings – The study suggested that reflexivity can allow both managers and employees to critically examine the conventional ways in which diversity and differences are understood, as this awareness can enable more relational approaches to diversity to be developed.

Research limitations/implications – Because of the chosen qualitative research approach, the specific findings cannot be generalized; rather, an example of the potential of reflexivity as practice in organizations is proffered and insights are offered to enable further academic enquiry and practical considerations.

Practical implications – Reflexivity stimulates both independent and shared action-learning sense-making processes which support equal participation. This challenges and expands the diversity agendas prevalent in the applied field of managing diversity. For example, by positioning organizational diversity as an inter-subjective and contextual process, meaningful dialogue between employees and managers becomes possible. Moreover, as reflexivity allows for a range of narrative accounts to emerge from such embedded activities, this approach can serve as a model for similar dialogical processes to occur within the wider organization. In addition, this paper provides insight into how reflexivity as practice for both practitioners and researchers can offer a means for more collaborative relationships to develop at the practitioner/researcher nexus.

Originality/value – The paper endeavors to make a contribution to both the academic and the practitioner managing diversity fields by demonstrating that reflexive practice can add significant value to managing diversity processes in organizations and research.

Keywords Sense-making, Reflexivity, Australia, Storytelling, Action learning, Managing diversity, Practitioner research

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

Much has been written about managing diversity, its benefits, opportunities and challenges as illustrated by Healy *et al.* (2011), and by Strachan *et al.* (2009) from an Australian perspective. The research project underpinning this paper aims to make a contribution to the managing diversity field from a practitioner's perspective. By using my experience as an external consultant designing and operationalizing a managing diversity strategy, I was able, to engage in a *post hoc* qualitative, reflexive analysis of my own work. I was curious to explore how, as a practitioner, I was able to navigate the

complexities embedded in managing diversity organizational change processes and contribute in meaningful ways to people's experiences with diversity. The research question:

RQ1. Can reflexivity add value to managing diversity practice?

RQ1 emerged as a result of this exploratory process, and it is through this endeavor that I am able to answer the question in the affirmative and provide a practical example.

Reflexivity in managing diversity adds value because it provides a process through which critical reflection can occur on organizational interpersonal relationship, hegemonic processes and practices in order to surface and critically examine underpinning assumptions and values and institute change. As such, it enables managing diversity to be apprehended as an ongoing complex action-learning organizational process of creating meaning, knowledge and action between and among all individuals and levels of an organization (Bouten-Pinto, 2009). As such, the study discussed in this paper provides *post hoc* insights into the complexities that are embedded in organizational change processes as they occurred in the organization I was involved in, and how I, as the consultant, influenced the process.

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

The study on which this paper is based ultimately made a contribution for practitioners and to the managing diversity literature by providing an example of how critical and self-reflexivity adds significant rigor to qualitative organizational research studies and to managing diversity practice. This is important, as it endeavors to add substance to an industry of management consultants that is often soundly critiqued in academic management literature for its reductionist approaches to organizational issues like managing diversity (Kirton and Greene, 2005; Litvin, 2002; Bissett, 1998). In addition, through this endeavor I provide examples of the dynamics practitioners contend within the field, and propose that more reflexive stances employed by the researcher may contribute to the development of more nuanced perspectives and more collaborative relationships between practitioners and researchers. By providing my perspectives as both a practitioner and as a researcher, I endeavor to provide insight into how reflexivity as practice for both practitioners and researchers can offer a means for such collaborative relationships to develop.

Reflexivity in research and in managing diversity practice
The notion of reflexivity in qualitative research is gaining acceptance as a legitimate process (Alvesson and Sandberg, 2011), and in order to establish the connection to managing diversity practice, I will begin by unpacking this notion within the context of qualitative research first. Following this, I will endeavor to establish its relevance as a

practice to managing diversity by introducing some pertinent narratives and insights gained from my practice as illustrations.

Reflexivity is a strand of qualitative research methodology that focusses on the relationship between the researcher and that which is studied (Brannick and Coghlan, 2006). In particular, it aims to expose how relationships and interpretations of meaning and the actions that follow are formed in relation to the conduct of research (Alvesson and Skoldberg, 2005). These factors are interrogated by the researcher, who is engaging in a systematic process of reflection in relation to all aspects of their endeavor. As such, reflexivity provides an action framework for critical interrogation and analysis of these reflections in relation to taken for granted practices and underpinning assumptions.

For example, as identified earlier, Cunliffe (2003) describes radical reflexivity as a two-phased constructionist and deconstructionist activity. She describes both as an activity of looking back, but each with a different focus. Constructionist activity focusses on the ways of being, enacting and how one makes sense of, and experiences the world. The deconstructionist activity, in contrast, places this experience within specifically adopted theoretical frameworks which allow the character of what is known and how it came to be known to be identified in more rigorous ways. Hence, a reflective element is introduced to qualitative research which both acknowledges and systematically manages the inter-subjective aspects of the research. For example, it enables the different roles, perspectives, language, meanings and understandings of the researcher and the research participants to be identified and acknowledged as influencing the research.

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

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

Furthermore, Holliday describes the research process as comprised of a set of interactions taking place between the perspective of the researcher and the culture of the research setting whose influences have a direct bearing on the way the research process is perceived. Rather than positioning people as mere objects of study for a researcher, it positions both the researcher and the people within the research setting as "participants" in a research process. The subsequent relationships then create a "culture of dealing" which is influenced by four specific dimensions and processes: "background cultural differences"; "projecting and othering"; "inter-competence"; and "discourse politics" (Holliday, 2007).

The concept of background cultural differences is self-explanatory as reflecting the influences each participant brings to the research relationship. "Projecting and othering" represents how each participant sees the other, what pre-conceived notions are invoked and how these in turn influence future interactions. The dimension of inter-competence reflects the relative status and power ascribed within the relationship between the researcher and the participants in the research. The latter also influences perceptions about each other's cultural background, identity and relative status and thus influences how we respond in terms of "projecting and othering," and what we deem to be possible.

The examination of the "discourse politics" dimension is particularly important in reflexive research according to Holliday, because the use and choice of what he describes as "highly technologized" researcher discourse; the language and texts chosen by the researcher to approach and negotiate the research project can put participants at a disadvantage. For example, the method by which questions are crafted and asked by the researcher, may be derived from the perspective of the researcher only, and thus potentially objectify and silence the perspectives of participants. Holliday thus discusses the power of the researchers' professional discourse in the "culture of dealing" as having the potential to stand in the way of the development of meaningful relationships between the researcher and participants.

Here he is signifying that unlike in positivist research, in reflexive research the engagement of the researcher in the environment and the relationships and empathy created is likely to lead to rich and meaningful information. Hence, he proposes that researchers "liberate" themselves from professional discourse, take on roles that are meaningful to the culture entered into and establish relationships with the people in the research setting on their own terms (Holliday, 2007). For example, professional discourse often dictates what is appropriate and or desirable in terms of methodology and method, as well as what is deemed important in terms of interpretation of research findings. This potentially inhibits the researcher to take on a role that is truly meaningful to all participants involved in the research. Therefore, by actively uncovering and interrogating taken for granted researcher assumptions enable the researcher to "liberate" themselves from their professional discourse.

Following from the two discourses around reflexivity described above, which revolve largely around minimizing bias and making bias visible, Hosking and Pluut (2010) introduce a third discourse around reflexivity. This third discourse around reflexivity is one of "ongoing dialoguing." They suggests that, within a relational constructionist framework, research is a process whereby "the identities of the researcher, the research objects and related realities are in ongoing re-construction" (Hosking and Pluut, 2010, p. 76). As such, participants engage in a relational process of dialoguing and also turn back on the construction of the inquiry in order to unsettle prevailing and dominant ways of knowing and being that operate within these

processes. Through this ongoing continuous dynamic, multiple ways of knowing and being emerge and are given credibility by the participants involved. It is within this process that power relations can be explored and identified as they relate to the knowledge and identities being constructed and where the influence of the professional discourse of the researcher must be uncovered and explored.

This third discourse of reflexivity closely mirrors the "action-reflection-action" action-learning cycle proposed by Cherry (1998), and the "relationships of dealing" as suggested by Holliday (2007). However, it also makes and additional contribution by suggesting that these processes, in addition to being reflexive in the sense of looking back, are also ongoing processes of re-constructing local realities and identities and thus enable the opening up of spaces to link to broader notions of being and learning.

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

Managing diversity

For the last few decades, the notion of "managing diversity" has been a key management approach claimed to be capable of harnessing the skills, knowledge and abilities of diverse employees within organizations to create competitive advantage (Harris and Moran, 1991; Hayles and Mendez-Russel, 1997). Representing an instrumental-based managerialist approach, diversity, from this perspective, is portrayed as comprised of characteristics of individuals and, in relation to the workforce, as needing to be discovered, identified, categorized, controlled and managed (Holvino and Kamp, 2009; Kelly and Dobbin, 1998) Managing diversity initiatives therefore have largely assumed it is possible to do just that (Benschop, 2001; Bissett, 2004). In addition, the "doing" of managing diversity has often been relegated to the domain of middle managers operating on specific organizational directives issued by senior management.

These policy agendas tend to result from senior management reactions to pervasive case study narratives promoted by diversity consultants regarding how successful diversity management can be in terms of gaining new markets and achieving higher workforce productivity outputs. Herein lay the shortcomings of the managing diversity initiative, in that it is positioned as something that needs doing through controlled mechanisms and operationalized in narrow managerialist terms. Workplace diversity thus, is framed as a problem that needs to be controlled (managed) and accordingly designated as a job for managers only; reinforcing the tradition of command and control top-down management processes.

An additional problem is that managing diversity applications are invariably lumped into an already overflowing basket of things to do for middle managers and hence likely to only receive attention when diversity is considered to have an adverse effect on productivity and other associated bottom-line objectives. Overall, in terms of fundamental underlying assumptions, managing diversity programs reflect a positivist, objectivist mindset with hierarchically driven rationalizations being taken for granted. This means managing diversity practices tend to be merely: paid lip-service to; are narrowly focussed on ensuring compliance with governmental bodies of legislation; reflect programs imposed on people; and, are rarely modeled by senior managers and executives via sensitized actions and in terms of representation of marginalized identity groups (Heres and Benschop, 2010; Foster Curtis and Dreachslin, 2008; Kirton and Greene, 2005).

As a consultant focussing primarily on cultural diversity practice in organizations, in my work I too have used this approach and thus been guilty of serving as an instrument myself for the imposition of questionable practices on others. In addition, I have also observed and experienced the ad-hoc, stop-start; bolted-on approach to doing diversity that is so prevalent in organizations today (Bean, 2008). Is it any wonder then that after all this time, and all the work that has been done, many organizations continue to look at workforce diversity as something problematic and something that an organization *has* (a tool to manipulate), rather than something that is (i.e. an embedded social and political phenomenon).

It is this fundamental difference in perceiving organizational diversity that enables the repositioning of the doing of diversity as a dynamic action-reflection-action developmental process that happens in the moment and includes all employees, and that is inclusive of all aspects of diversity that matter to the employees, not just those mandated by or sanctioned through organizational directives or legislation. Moreover, positioning managing diversity as a developmental process, rather than focussing on narrow notions of compliance only, enables a focus on increasing employees' capacity to appreciate, negotiate and overcome barriers to effective interactions based on their perceptions of difference as present in the moment.

In managing diversity in organizations, it is therefore proposed that reflexivity becomes a key practice in action-learning processes, where both managers and employees collaboratively deconstruct, critically reflect on and reconstruct the environments, identities and relationships that are perceived as conducive for devising and achieving objectives that achieve shared outcomes. This enables sense making and considering of aspects of diversity in an organization when and where they matter most to the people involved. This is important, because this creative dynamic process is located within, informed by and relevant to the context in which it takes place. Moreover, it enables those aspects of diversity that constitute and are relevant to the identities of the employees working within a particular context to be brought to the forefront in more meaningful ways. This then enables a dynamic focus on the employees, their workplace, their workplace relationships as well as organizational objectives. Thus enabling an agenda that is understood as meeting the diversity objectives of both the organization and its employees to be crafted and enacted. As such, the potential for inclusion of and dialogue around all aspects of diversity that matter to the people within a particular workplace context is opened up.

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

Methodology and method
As introduced earlier, reflexivity is a strand of qualitative research methodology that focusses on the relationship between the researcher and that which is studied (Brannick and Coghlan, 2006). In particular, it aims to expose how relationships and interpretations of meaning and the actions that follow are formed in relation to the conduct of research. These factors are interrogated through the researcher engaging in a systematic process of reflection. As a component of an "Action Research" methodology such reflections are particularly pertinent to this after the fact study.

Action research and the practice of reflexivity exhibit a parallel set of assumptions in relation to how social meanings are derived. For example, a basic tenet of both is the recognition that constructions of reality, in terms of how we perceive ourselves and others, emerge from the embedded contexts in which we make sense of what we know and how we come to know and name such experiences (Cunliffe, 2003). Therefore according to Jun (1994) and Cunliffe (2003) we constantly construct and reframe meanings and social realities through our interactions with others as well as reflecting on our direct experiences. These in turn are influenced by our social, cultural and linguistic traditions which further demonstrates the situational and relativistic nature of our sense making processes.

In the study, a narrative, three staged approach to organizational research as proposed by Czarniawska (1999) was used and echoed the following steps: organizing the process of listening and gathering and collecting the stories in the field; the interpretation, analysis and deconstruction of the collected stories and; engaging in a process of theorizing (Czarniawska, 1999, p. 47). However, as this was a *post hoc* endeavor, stage one revolved around the process of re-engaging with the consultancy project materials, and stage two around re-interpreting, re-analyzing and reflexively recounting the stories embedded within these materials. From there, using the latter stage of Czarniawska's narrative approach, and engaging Cunliffe's (2003) radical reflexivity process of "construction" and "deconstruction," I critically interrogated my own constructs of information and thus recounted the stories of the consultancy project as interpreted through a secondary review of the materials created at the time. From there, I deconstructed the experiences by placing these within adopted organizational discourse, organizational change, sense-making and intercultural theoretical frameworks.

Holliday's (2007) perspective on reflexivity provided an additionally useful lens as a means to deal with the complex entanglements of the social world in which researchers find themselves and contribute to. It provided a means through which I could make sense of and deliberate on the various cultural frameworks and discourses that operated in the consultancy project, as a reflexive researcher engaging in this endeavor.

By identifying the "culture of dealing" aspects I was able to frame and analyze the impacts of my role as a consultant, from my own perspective and explore the interpretive and inter-subjective elements operating in the consultancy project. By engaging in this systematic reflective process I was also able to acknowledge and manage the inter-subjective aspects of my research. Also, by documenting these complexities I showed "the workings of the study" in a disciplined way and accounted for the specific research strategies adopted in the study (Holliday, 2007; Alvesson and Skoldberg, 2005; Cunliffe, 2003; Cherry, 1998).

The organization

The organization in the study is a regional division of an Australia wide company concerned with the distribution of goods and the provision of retail services, whom I shall refer to as MAC. Historically, MAC was until the latter part of the twentieth century an employer of men, where at the time of the study gender ratios represented a 70/30 male/female split in the organization. These ratios were mirrored in the regional division in which the consultancy project took place. Most female employees occupied positions in retail, administration and support. Anecdotal information, my experience of its bureaucratic approval processes and systems and strict delineation between business units, led me to perceive MAC as hierarchical, bureaucratic, male dominated

and representative of its industry. However, MAC was aware of this and it had recognized that in order for it to remain a player in what it perceived to be an increasingly competitive and demanding market, it needed to adopt a much more enterprise focussed approach to enable a broader demographic representation and a flatter, more responsive management structure (Little and Little, 2006; Cattermole *et al.*, 2013). MAC's awareness and desire for change was reflected in its "People Management Strategy" which was an integral components of its corporate and business plans. However, this was not necessarily reflected in its practices.

The diversity discourse of MAC revolved largely around its "People Management Strategy," of which a "Diversity Strategy" and a "Code of Ethics" were key components. As such, organizational diversity initiatives revolved around: recruitment and retention; flexible employment conditions; reflecting local demographics in its workforce; culturally sensitive customer service; improved people management to achieve competitive advantage; realizing diversity potential; and, ensuring compliance with equal employment opportunity legislation. Targets were articulated in terms of both qualitative as well as numerical outcomes relating to the main groups identified by EEO legislation; women, indigenous people, people from a culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds and persons with a disability. In addition, a focus on older worker participation and work-life balance was articulated as a qualitative outcome.

In addition to achieving outcomes under the above broad targets, MAC's Code of Ethics, provided guidelines to specific organizational behaviors, which were delineated under four key concepts: integrity, honesty, fairness and courtesy. It articulated MAC's corporate values, defined what it perceived as "ethics" and provided direction in the form of corporate minimum standards and descriptions for appropriate workplace behavior, work practices and performance. In addition, it also identified the consequences for breaches and the processes to follow in case of the detection of a breach.

The Diversity Strategy and the Code of Ethics where communicated to employees throughout MAC in the form of glossy, prescriptive and wordy brochures. How to make sense of, understand and operationalize these documents was largely left open to interpretation by individual managers and workers. At the time, it struck me as somewhat odd that an organization, committed to diversity in the workplace would not pay particular attention to how these prescriptive types of documents would be received, interpreted, understood and acted upon by all levels of the organization. The lack of attention to the impact of this and the existing communication practices in the organization proved to be a key issue addressed in the consultancy project.

The consultancy project

The Consultancy project was initially conceived in response to the need for regional human resources staff to be able to deliver on the above corporate diversity objectives and targets. After I had initial discussions and engagements with these staffs, it became clear that in addition to issues regarding meeting objectives, there was a disconnect with the way MAC's discourse on diversity was understood by the regional human resources staff, and the way in which they were to deliver on specific objectives within their region. As such, the consultancy project evolved into meeting three specific needs: the need for regional human resources staff to be able to interpret, understand and effectively communicate organizational diversity directives to all staff; rollout diversity initiatives that would engage employees around these objectives within their own regional context; and enable human resources staff to be able to meet the corporate diversity targets.

To provide some insight into my impact as a consultant, I will provide a brief example of how the consultancy project came to be, as it is illustrative of my approach, and how an outsider perspective can provide the impetus for renewed motivation and action (Coghlan, 2007; Humphrey, 2007).

Being new to the region, and wanting to develop my profile, I organized a public diversity workshop at the time, entitled "Planning for Diversity in the Workplace." A representative from MAC, whom I shall refer to as Mary, attended this workshop. Following this workshop, Mary approached me and requested me to provide her with a proposal to facilitate a four-hour introductory workshop with her organization's regional division human resources team along the same lines as the one she had attended. She indicated to me that they were "struggling" to meet their corporate diversity quotas. In order to prepare the proposal and provide focus for the four-hour workshop, Mary provided me with basic organizational information on the structure of the regional division and the Corporate Diversity Directives as well as her perception of the issues to be addressed. In addition, prior to the workshop I requested participants to complete a Diversity Management Inventory; an instrument developed as part of a larger diversity management project commissioned by the Australian government (Bean *et al.*, 2001).

Based on Mary's insights, the results of the Diversity Management Inventory, the size and nature of the organization and the prescriptiveness of their written diversity strategy materials, I did not expect any ongoing involvement with MAC past the workshop. I just hoped that my "outsider" perspective on their issues would assist participants in revisiting their own perspectives and enable them to re-energize and move on. However, this proved not to be the case.

During the workshop, it became increasingly clear to me that there was a disconnect between participants' understandings of MAC's Diversity Strategy and it's Code of Ethics as a means to achieve its objectives. What struck me was that they saw the Code of Ethics as "just another document" and as a disciplinary tool only. To explore this further, I asked participants to explain the Code of Ethics, how it worked in the workplace and how well they believed the Code of Ethics was understood by the workers. Participants expressed that the Code of Ethics described behavioral standards, and that it was used extensively by managers as a tool for "counseling" workers who displayed inappropriate behaviors in the workplace. They also contributed that many workers viewed the Code of Ethics as "corporate rhetoric" and "a bit of a joke," and as "management's big stick" to keep workers in line. What further struck me was that I suspected that the term "counseling" was used by managers as a euphemism for "disciplinary action." This perception was confirmed during the interviews I had with workers and the managers at the pilot sites.

My suggestion during the workshop to use the Code of Ethics as a tool for creating dialogue around diversity and workplace behaviors among workers opened a whole new direction in the discussion. Further exploration sparked the realization by participants that including workers in defining and developing shared meanings around Code of Ethics' concepts could create shared ownership around workplace behaviors and potentially create a more positive, inclusive and productive workplace atmosphere. I realized that the workshop also signaled recognition by the participants that attention to understandings of the diversity agenda held by the lower levels of the organization needed to be addressed.

The lack of attention to involving staff at all levels was acknowledged as hindering more inclusive practices in relation to diversity. The turning point in the discussion came when there was a conceptual leap forward in participants' thinking around issues

of diversity and inclusion. It seemed that up until that time the concept of dialogue and developing shared meaning around organizational directives had escaped the participants as an option. This was not surprising, given the organizational culture of MAC. However, I also realized that a strategy such as this could conceivably encounter resistance from the organization as a whole as well as from individual managers and workers alike. Nevertheless, the workshop concluded on a high note. In addition, participants realized that using the Code of Ethics as a tool for dialogue with workers rather than for enforcement only could provide insights into how diversity in the workplace might be operationalized. I believe that it was then that participants began to shift their conceptual thinking about diversity from a "task to be done" to a more positive and potentially intrinsic part of their work.

The main objective of the workshop had been to enable participants to discover what had caused their challenges, to develop some personal and collective action steps to overcome these challenges and to re-energize the team. It included a review of MAC's "Workforce Diversity Business Strategy," which included the organizational Code of Ethics, in order to reinforce and/or establish shared meanings, hold a discussion of participants current activities within this strategy, their perceptions of results and challenges, and a reflection on what had been learned to date. It turned out that the four-hour workshop with the regional human resources staff set the tone for the resulting consultancy project.

From a broad perspective, the consultancy project thus required to provide means for operationalizing the broad organizational diversity directives in practical ways, that would make sense within the context of MAC's regional division and its workplaces, and to overcome workplace-based issues. The latter became the most important driver for the consultancy project and it resulted in the development and implementation of a program and a resource that enabled managers and employees to engage in dialogues around key aspects contained within the Code of Ethics, and what this meant for them. As such, the broad aim of the program was to make diversity in all of it forms discussable and engage employees in the development of localized solutions to their diversity issues. In addition, after conducting two pilots, regional human resources staffs hoped it to also lead to the development of more harmonious workplace-based relationships in a number of key worksites where incidences of what were deemed to be inappropriate workplace behaviors had occurred. The program was subsequently implemented in an additional three worksites.

Although employees at the lower echelons of MAC were kept duly informed about, and were generally aware of the organizational diversity directives, by means of bulletin boards and top-down verbal communication, they were not included in the shaping of directives, nor were they consulted in meaningful ways about how these directives were to be enacted upon in their particular workplaces. As such, most employees perceived these directives with suspicion and harbored distinct feelings of contempt and suspicion. This lead to disengagement, disconnect and feelings of marginalization, as illustrated by the following comments:

Management needs to stop pressing their authority on small issues and look at other ways of gaining respect. Speaking to us nicely, listening and hearing us.

Management is now intent on screwing every last cent out of the business. We are no longer people, but treated as machines or beasts of burden. For example: Quality Assurance and OHS are passive bureaucracy and only for show. The bottom line – nothing else is treated seriously, just fake it, cover it up, forget it $$$$$$ are the real truth (Pilot Site Participants).

This lack of engagement with the organization by these employees also resulted frequently in a lack of willingness to invest and expend discretionary effort (Pollit, 2008; Woodruffe, 2006; Vernon, 2005) as illustrated by the comments below:

> I know there are a lot of good people here who are cut down every time they try to make a difference some are so scarred from hurtful experience & humiliation they may never try again.

> Things need to change drastically around here – workers are unhappy and don't want to come to work. We are being treated unfairly (Pilot Site Participants).

Even though there were mechanisms (daily team briefs) in place in the lower echelons of the organization that could have been used to enable more engagement around the organizational diversity discourse, and encourage participation and discussion of its desired outcomes, these mechanisms were time limited and used primarily for one-way top-down communication purposes. This prevented the development of the meaningful mutually beneficial relationships that are required between workers and managers to enable effective participation in the shaping of an inclusive workplace. Moreover, it also prevented discussion and dialogue around managing diversity objectives and other human dimensions in the workplace to take place.

As a diversity practitioner, I had learned early on in my career that in order to maximize a diversity initiatives' potential, it is imperative to operationalize any type of diversity initiative by transforming already well-established organizational practices, rather than establishing new ones. By reframing existing practices, the potential for resistance to change diminishes, as it reduces change anxiety (Appelbaum *et al.*, 2015; Nakra, 2003). As such, the timeframes used for the earlier mentioned top-down communication mechanisms were redeployed. However, rather than providing for top down, one-way communication, they would now provide the space and time for more mutual dialogue. In addition, a program and a resource to facilitate this dialogue were devised. It included a focus on organizational objectives around diversity, what that looked like in practice in each worksite, and issues that were important to the employees. Managers and team leaders at two selected pilot sites were trained to facilitate such dialogue with their staff using the resource.

Relevant issues were identified through workplace-based surveys and individual interviews I conducted with each employee at the pilot worksites. I then developed the resource based on the survey results, interview observations, previous critical incidents within the organization and discussions with individual managers and human resources staff. Thus, the resource consisted of cartoons and short narratives based on diversity-based critical incidents that had taken place somewhere in the organization and were linked to themes and concepts derived from MAC's "Code of Ethics."

To engage workers, the managers and team leaders involved in the program would choose specific cartoons and short narratives to guide dialogue to unpack, discuss and reflect on and problem solve around current workplace-based issues. In order to prepare the managers and team leaders, I provided the initial facilitator training, and, during the role-out of the program, ongoing individualized support to the managers and team leaders involved. The support I provided to the managers and team leaders mirrored the process in which they engaged their workers. It was through engaging in the *post hoc* reflexive study, I realized that during the initial training and these subsequent encounters, the reflexive dialogical approach was the key practice that operationalized the program for managers and team leaders. I just did not know that at the time.

Likewise, in the workplace context, using the vehicle of the existing daily team briefs the cartoons and narratives enabled managers and team leaders to introduce and stimulate reflection and dialogue with employees around workplace issues. These were then linked to the wider organizational diversity agenda. As such, the program provided resources, and, what I now know to be, a reflexive dialogical process by which mutual understandings on diversity between managers and employees could be fostered. Managers and employees focussed in particular on clarifying their own perspectives on issues and points of view and as they related to their own places of work and their workplace relationships, rather than on meeting organizational objectives only.

However, the bureaucratic hierarchical forms of organizing present within MAC did not cater well for this type of program. It responded to organizational diversity directives in so far that these demanded that managers adopt more people orientated approaches that embody the executive's organizational diversity management objectives. In addition, the program also provided a means for managers to shift toward a more enterprising approach in their particular workplaces. However, MAC's hierarchical organizational form, discourse and existing hegemonic forces continued to disempower managers willing to show initiative and pay attention to the human dimensions in the workplace. This became evident in how managers perceived and worked with the program in different ways. For example, at one worksite the manager saw the program as an opportunity to develop more meaningful relationships and include employees in making decisions about workplace-based issues that affected them, in more significant ways. This manager seemed to draw motivation and strength from the process as well as my ongoing involvement and coaching. At another worksite, however, I believe the manager perceived the program as too risky toward her own career advancement within the existing organizational hegemony. Although we developed good rapport, her demeanor regarding the project remained guarded, and she consistently asked questions in relation to who in the organization was driving the program, her peers involved and their perceptions. It did not surprise me that during the implementation of the program, she decided to accept a role elsewhere in the organization that was not involved in the consultancy project. Upon reflection, it struck me that her line of questioning would have helped her reflect on the potential influence of her involvement on own career advancement within MAC. However, as she had left, I was unable to explore this with her further.

Reflexively engaging with my own work
Following from the consultancy project, and informed by the combined work of Cunliffe (2003), Czarniawska (1999), Holliday (2007) and Alvesson and Skoldberg (2005), in the study, I was able to critically interrogate my own constructs of information that had thus far underpinned the consultancy project. I recounted the stories of the consultancy project through a secondary review of the materials that were created. In addition, I also engaged with discourse analysis, organizational change, managing diversity, sense-making and intercultural literature and critically reflected on these accounts. This enabled me to develop the further understandings and insights into the relationships I encountered and explore the possibilities for mutually beneficial organizational change. It is through this process that I began to recognize and understand the potential of reflexive practice for managing diversity practice.

I realized that in addition to the opportunity for managers and employees to engage in focussed reflexive discussions around the cartoons and narratives, it also created the space for dialogue and reflection around wider workplace dynamics. For example, in all

of the workplaces described in the study, employees and managers established parameters around what they believed to be desirable and undesirable behaviors in the workplace and agreed to strategies for communication when behaviors in the workplace challenged these parameters. Thus, the process enabled a shared and mutually beneficial perspective around workplace-based relationships and new narratives around the organization and its diversity directives to emerge.

As such, through scenario-based dialogues managers and employees engaged in an action-learning process and collectively deconstructed and reconstructed their perspectives on what construed a productive and inclusive workplace. By engaging in processes of careful interpretation and reflection on their own pre-formed assumptions, language and understandings, and those contained in the organizational discourse they began to realize how this influences what they collectively perceive as possible. This is illustrated by the following comments shared by employees at an implementation site:

> One idea led people's thoughts into the right direction and got things moving along.

> Communication between people in both the teams and then on the floor later (Employee Implementation Site 1).

> I believe this will be helpful due to scenarios which are related to the team.

> Ideas came freely from a lot of people which prompted other ideas or extensions to the answers given (Employee Implementation Site 1).

> All in all I would say that the groups worked well, given that this is new to people. I think we can only improve as we go along (Employee Implementation Site 2).

Thus they actively engaged in creating the type of workplace they wanted and established relational parameters while also taking into consideration the objectives of the organization. Therefore, rather than the manager needing to "manage diversity," it became a mutually beneficial relational process. This process was reinforced by the emerging narratives around relational ways of being in the workplace which were based on shared understandings of the dynamics of diversity in the workplace, as experienced by them; and not just on organizational diversity directives.

As such, in addition to answering the research question, the study provided a preliminary example of how reflexive practice enables differences to be managed more meaningfully and relationally. In addition, from a more personal perspective, my more reflexive practice as a cultural diversity consultant and my ongoing research is providing me with a means to reflect on and explore this further.

It is interesting to note that at the workplace where the manager left early in the program, the new manager was motivated to participate and I was thus able to also reflect on how organizational hegemonic forces influence middle management decision making (Sims, 2003). It is here where a parallel could also be drawn in reflexivity in research and in diversity practice. A parallel between the researcher freeing themselves from researcher discourse, as suggested by Holliday (2007), and a manager freeing themselves from prevailing organizational discourses and hegemony. It is at that point that both the researcher and the manager can develop more meaningful and mutually beneficial and satisfactory relationships.

As there was a difference between managers and their perceived ability to participate in the program, this raises interesting questions about the influence of organizational hegemony and power on what is perceived as possible. The managers who perceived the

program to provide them with an alternative and sanctioned approach to problem solve in the workplace seized the opportunity. This is reflected in the following comment received by one of the managers who participated in the program:

We are halfway to where we could get to, we made enormous headway but it will take a couple more months. People are more open and are starting to report danger signs, they communicate to pre-empt stuff rather than wait for it to burst. People trust me to report to them the positive as well as the negative, and there are a lot fewer personal attacks. Despite there not having been an emphasis on supervision and monitoring, overall performance and sick leave has improved, and all workers, bar one, are performing to standard. The program gave workers a forum to have a say and outlined and gave focus to the topics of concern. It showed workers that as individuals they are important to the business and the Centre; this had not been shown before. The focus on relationships and communication made it all real. It helped people realize what tools they can use, that they have choices about how they can act. For me, the program and the coaching provided a good support factor to make good cultural change. It is workable, doable and achievable, and it gave me and other workers opportunities to vent with the coach one-on-one as a third party, which is pretty important. Maintaining a culture of respect and communication will need monitoring and constant attention, it is like a car, it needs maintenance, oil and petrol, if you don't maintain a car, it eventually will break down. What this process has made clear is that once a manager is able to allow a process like this to happen, workers will take the opportunity and the responsibility for making it work. The program is a trigger for communication and positive culture maintenance (Manager Pilot Site).

However, this manager also noted the following:

It is important to make this process a priority. You will get up against operational things, regardless what happens, this has to be a priority. You need to be consistent in the rollout and keeping a tight timeframe upfront is beneficial as workers will see it as crucial, otherwise you will lose people. You have to give it 100% otherwise it is wasting everyone's time (Manager Pilot Site).

Even though the program was based on MAC's organizational diversity directives, it provided a new "hook" and a process for managers and employees to reflexively discuss and unpack their own narratives and interpretations about workplace-based dynamics. As such, individual and organizational interpretations and assumptions embedded within the organizational diversity directives and in the workplace were explored, unpacked and discussed and collectively made sense of.

For example, in one of the worksites employees had perceived the "Code of Ethics" as an organizational disciplinary tool. By engaging in the reflexive dialogue process introduced by the program, over time, employees began to see and use the "Code of Ethics" as a framework for discussion and to guide dialogue about parameters for workplace-based relationships. In addition, at another workplace employees began to see the job of the manager through different eyes and became more empathetic when employee actions inadvertently negatively affected the manager. Also, the process of collectively gaining these insights impacted significantly and in positive ways on team development at these sites. Employees began to increasingly take responsibility for their own actions and considered the impact these had on others. As such, in addition to improved morale and workplace atmosphere, very tangible business results such as reduced absenteeism and increased productivity were achieved.

The program stimulated and enabled employees and managers to engage in independent and shared action-learning sense making about perspectives and unpack assumptions that operated within their particular workplaces. However, the program

also raises more fundamental questions for today's diverse organizations around how to transform traditional managing diversity notions and approaches into more relationally centered endeavors that focus less on identity and more on the embedded social and political dynamics of diversity.

However, this shift would potentially raise additional questions; particularly as it relates to leadership, ethics and practice. For example, does exploring diversity in a more mutually informed and shared approach and as a naturally occurring dynamic and relational process that takes place within organizations require a different approach to leadership? How are prevailing notions of heroic leadership helping or hindering such processes to take hold in organizations? With regards to ethics, questions could potentially revolve around prevailing notions of absolute morals dictated by universalist approaches to ethics and how to consider more cultural relativistic perspectives in organizations (Das Neves and Melé, 2013).

Lastly, in order for reflexivity to take hold as practice, practical implications need to be addressed. For example, in organizations where people perceive themselves to be increasingly time poor, how can time and space be provided for such processes to take place? Or does reflexivity enable us to also critically examine organizational practices and beliefs regarding what we perceive as possible in terms of practice? I believe that the project provided insight into how people in organizations can be supported in this process. This is important as unexamined held values, beliefs and biases at the individual, group and organizational level dictate what people perceive as possible in terms of change. The program discussed enabled these unexamined values, beliefs and biases to be surfaced and critically reflected upon at the practical level, and it resulted in tangible benefits of increased engagement, higher morale, increased productivity and lower absenteeism.

Conclusion

Based on the study, I was able to draw the following conclusions. First, a key ingredient in managing diversity organizational change initiatives is the development of mutually beneficial relationships between managers and employees. Second, that reflexivity in managing diversity practice enables taken for granted assumptions about identities, roles, perspectives, language, meanings and understandings between all people in an organization to be explored and redefined in ways that matter to the people in their particular workplace context. Third, that more relational approaches to managing diversity potentially raises questions for leadership and ethics in organizations that require further investigation. Also, that by reframing existing workplace practices it is possible to engage in action-learning reflexive processes. Lastly, that providing for time and commitment upfront, tangible organizational benefits can be achieved and perceived time losses can be ameliorated.

I have since evolved my own practice as a diversity practitioner and work much more reflexively. I consistently reflect on my own thoughts, feelings and perspectives; identify their origins and endeavor to examine these from a variety of different theoretical and practical standpoints. In addition, I have incorporated reflexivity as practice as a key ingredient in management, leadership and practice development endeavors (Cunliffe, 2003, 2004). In addition, I have since developed an approach to cultural diversity practice that emerged in part from what I learned from this study and which is at the core of further research. As a practitioner I continue to search for ways to enable people in organizations to engage with diversity through means that are meaningful to them and that challenge perspectives and prevailing assumptions.

As such, my recommendation to practitioners is to recognize, that first, in managing diversity practice, there is no one best practice or "silver bullet approach." Second, that the search for the most effective way in the organization is part of an action-learning process that contextualizes what is perceived as possible by those affected most. Third, that existing organizational discourses and hegemony will continue to influence perceptions.

As a researcher and a PhD candidate I am now in the process of expanding my current approach into a potential framework for Diversity Praxis. With this I aim to make a case to displace traditional diversity management notions in favor of more relationally focussed approaches. This leads me to my final recommendation for academics to also work more relationally with practitioners, as I believe this would benefit both the quality of research and the outcomes in practice.

In addition, through this endeavor I provide examples of the dynamics practitioners contend within the field, and propose that more reflexive stances employed by researchers may contribute to the development of more nuanced perspectives and more collaborative relationships between practitioners and researchers. By providing my perspectives as both a practitioner and as a researcher, I endeavor to provide insight into how reflexivity as practice for both practitioners and researchers can offer a means for such collaborative relationships to develop.

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