Alternative diversity management: Organizational practices fostering ethnic equality at work

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KEYWORDS
Diversity management practices;
Ethnic equality at work;
Ethnic minorities;
Employment relation;
Structural inequality;
Broadened norms

Abstract Taking a critical, performative stance, this study aims to advance our understanding of diversity management enhancing ethnic equality at work. Relying on a multiple-case study, we inductively identify organizational practices that foster the valuing of multiple competencies and the ability to express multiple identities, two key organizational markers of ethnic equality advanced in the gender and diversity literature. Our analysis indicates that ethnic equality is fostered by practices that broaden dominant norms on competencies and cultural identities, and avoid reducing ethnic minority employees to mere representatives of a stigmatized social group. In contrast to ‘classical’ diversity management practices which focus on individuals’ cognitive biases toward out-group members, these practices redefine what is ‘standard’ in the employment relationship, hereby structurally countering ethnic inequality within organizational boundaries.

Introduction
Despite two decades of research documenting and theorizing power inequality between the majority and historically underrepresented groups in organizations (Linnehan & Konrad, 1999; Prasad, Pringle, & Konrad, 2006), our current knowledge on how organizations can actually achieve power equality remains poor. The diversity management (DM) practices advanced in the scientific and managerial literature — e.g. formalized human resource management (HRM) procedures, diversity training, networking and mentoring — have not only been found largely ineffective in fostering equality (Kalev, Dobbin, & Kelly, 2006; Kulik & Roberson, 2008) but even counterproductive to the extent that they reinforce stereotypes and exacerbate the majority’s hostility toward minorities (Bond & Pyle, 1998; Linnehan & Konrad, 1999).

Starting from the social psychological assumption that inequality primarily originates in the negative in-group/out-group dynamics resulting from individuals’ biased cognitive processes (Byrne, 1971; Tajfel & Turner, 1986), classical DM practices aim to correct majority individuals’ stereotyping and prejudices (e.g. diversity training), to limit the discretion of biased decision makers regarding allocation and rewarding decisions (e.g. formalization of HRM procedures), and to compensate for majority’s exclusion of minorities due to their bias (e.g. networking and mentoring programs). Although social psychology acknowledges that contextual factors play a key role in triggering or diminishing negative in-group/out-group dynamics (Allport, 1954; Pettigrew &
Tropp, 2006), these practices do not address them. Rather, they directly address cognition, leaving organizational structures and routines which reproduce inequalities and normalize the privileges of the dominant group (e.g. white and male employees) unchanged (Jones & Stabilein, 2006; Kalev et al., 2006; Prasad, 2006; Zanoni, Janssens, Benshop, & Nkomo, 2010).

In this study, we seek to envision alternative DM practices which more effectively foster ethnic equality (cf. Holvino & Kamp, 2009; Litvin, 2006). To do so, we inductively identify practices — formalized organizational system, process, or practice developed and implemented for the purpose of effectively managing a diverse workforce (Yang & Konrad, 2011) — that achieve two key organizational markers of ethnic equality derived from the gender and diversity literature: (1) the valuing of multiple knowledge, skills and competencies of a diverse personnel (rather than valuing solely those of the majority) (Acker, 1990; Zanoni & Janssens, 2004; Zanoni & Janssens, 2007) and (2) the possibility for all employees to bring their entire set of identities to work (rather than having to assimilate to the majority culture) (Cox, 1991, 1993; Linnehan & Konrad, 1999). These markers point to structural contextual characteristics of organizations. They reflect the two main identity axes along which inter-ethnic power relations occur in organizations: class — i.e. ethnic minority employees’ subordinate position in the employment relation — and ethnicity — i.e. their ethnic/cultural/religious/linguistic subordinate position vis-à-vis the ethnic majority. By including both identity axes, we avoid reducing ethnic minority workers a priori to their particular cultural background, language and religion (Proudfoot & Nkomo, 2006).

Searching for alternative DM, this study seeks to contribute to the critically oriented diversity literature. While drawing on different critical theories (e.g. post-structuralism, Marxist theories, postcolonial theory, feminist perspectives), this literature shares at its core an understanding of diversity as socially (re)produced in ongoing, context-specific organizational processes which both reflect and reproduce structural power relations (Prasad et al., 2006; Zanoni et al., 2010). Power is conceptualized as a relation emerging from specific material and/or ideological structures, rather than as being located in individual cognition. Accordingly, these theories provide lenses that are suitable to highlight how organizational practices reinforce inequality along identity lines or, conversely, challenge structural elements of inequality.

In undertaking this search for alternative DM, we are aware of the difficulties and contradictions inherent to building ‘critical’ diversity theory from practices in capitalist organizations (cf. Foldy, 2002; Fournier & Grey, 2000). We neither deny nor champion the inherently instrumental nature of management. Rather, we take notice of it and opt to temporarily bracket our fundamental critique to engage with such practices (cf. Anthony, 1998) and gain an understanding of how organizations can achieve more equality between the majority and minorities, despite (and even, possibly, by virtue of) their capitalist nature. We follow Pringle, Konrad, and Prasad’s (2006) call for pushing critical approaches beyond the mere examination and exposition of situations of dominance and repression, melding them into the pragmatics of the daily management of diversity. So, we refuse to leave DM to non-critical, functionalistic research paradigms which aim to enhance performance instead of challenging inequalities (cf. Foldy, 2002). At the same time, we acknowledge the difficulties of the task at hand and do not evade critically self-reflecting on the (im)possibilities of equality-fostering DM practices in capitalist organizations.

Empirically, we present in depth one organization — a call center — that stood out in a larger multiple-case study of ten organizations for the equality it had achieved between ethnic majority and minority employees along the two above-mentioned markers. We complement our case analysis by comparing the practices of this organization with those implemented in the other nine, less equal organizations. Our findings suggest that organizations can enhance ethnic equality by deploying their power to enforce practices that redefine the employment relationship along broadened norms and avoid reducing ethnic minority employees to mere representatives of a stigmatized social group. Capitalist organizations are not necessarily sites maintaining ethnic inequality. By enforcing alternative structures, they can avoid reproducing the ethnic inequality institutionalized in broader society within their own boundaries, taking up a pioneering role in advancing ethnic equality.

Theoretical background

‘Classical’ diversity management practices

Whereas the critical diversity literature has pointed to structural organizational characteristics as the main reason for the enduring disadvantages of ethnic minorities at the workplace, the practices commonly advanced in the DM literature focus on individuals’ cognition and related discriminatory behavior (Kalev et al., 2006). We review here the main DM practices and their shortcomings as found in empirical studies.

One of the main diversity practices is formalized HRM procedures. Here, the argument is that objective and pre-specified criteria in selection, promotion, lay-off decisions (Konrad & Linnehan, 1995; Reskin, 2003), performance appraisal and pay structures (Elvira & Graham, 2002) will restrict ethnic majority decision makers’ discretion and prevent cognitive biases to shape allocation and rewarding decisions, reducing discrimination. While widespread, this diversity practice is not without discussion. Scholars have pointed to its limited impact because decisions makers’ discretion is not totally removed (Linnehan & Konrad, 1999) and, more importantly, because HRM systems continue to be culturally biased, valuing the skills and the qualities of the ethnic majority (Acker, 1990; Bond & Pyle, 1998). This latter critique is in line with our starting argument that a focus on individuals’ cognition does not adequately address power differentials and equality between social identity groups.

A second widespread practice is training. Based on the social psychological insight that information may reduce bias (Fiske, 1998), training modules familiarize employees with anti-discrimination law, suggest behavioral changes, and increase cultural awareness and cross-cultural communication (Pendry, Driscoll, & Field, 2007). However, some studies indicate that information about out-group members’ culture actually reinforces group stereotypes and prejudices (Ellis & Sonnenfeld, 1994; Rynes & Rosen, 1995) does not change
attitudes toward particular groups (Kulik & Roberson, 2008), and does not necessarily result in behavioral change (Hite & McDonald, 2006).

Finally, dedicated networking and mentoring initiatives have been designed to counter minorities’ social isolation due to homophilous patterns (Ibarra, 1995; Mollica, Gray, & Trevino, 2003). These initiatives are based on research showing that minority employees typically have less homophilous (same-race or same-sex) ties, less interpersonal closeness and fewer overlapping social circles providing social and instrumental support for their careers. However, also specifically designed mentoring or networking practices have found to be largely ineffective in fostering equality (Kalev et al., 2006). A first reason that has been advanced to explain this is that cross-race or cross-sex mentoring, more often than same-race or same-sex mentoring, produces conflict and does not meet all minorities’ needs (Thomas, 2001). Further, it is argued that the formality of specifically designed mentoring initiatives may impede their impact, as formal mentoring relationships provide less mentoring functions than informal ones (Ragins & Cotton, 1999).

As a whole, there is little empirical evidence that the current DM practices are adequate to foster ethnic equality at work. Our argument is that they are ineffective because they focus directly on individuals’ cognition rather than addressing the structural dimension of privilege, domination, disadvantage and deprivation (Glastra, Meerman, Schedler, & Sjiera de Vries, 2000; Zanoni et al., 2010). As Kalev et al. (2006) argue, although cognitive bias and its consequences may provide explanations of inequality at work, interventions focused on these aspects are not necessarily the best suited for its remediation: “Understanding the cause of malaria and understanding its treatment are two different things. Whether a prescription for inequality is effective is an inherently empirical question” (p. 591). Following their reasoning, we opted for a qualitative, multiple-case research design, a design allowing for the inductive identification of organizational practices fostering ethnic equality. Our search is guided by two organizational markers of ethnic equality derived from the critical gender and diversity literature. However, we do not uphold one particular critical theory, as this would limit our ability to inductively identify practices based on their effectiveness in reducing ethnic inequality.

Organizational markers of ethnic equality

The gender and diversity literature points to two structural equality markers of an ethnically diverse organization: the valuing of multiple forms of knowledge, skills and competencies and enabling all employees to express their identities. Both markers are crucial as they address structural aspects of the organizational context determining power differentials between employees belonging to different socio-demographic groups.

The first marker originates in the sociologically oriented literature which highlights that organizations have traditionally valued the competencies and skills of the social groups in historical positions of power, downplaying the value of those of less privileged groups (Ackerman, 1990; Cockburn, 1991; Steinerberg, 1990). What is competence and, conversely, who is competent is consequently not an ethnicity-neutral (nor gender-neutral) decision. ‘Competence’ involves judgment and ethnicity (and gender) affect assumptions about skill, resulting in decisions that while males are the more competent, more suited to the job than are others (Ackerman, 2006), particularly in the US—European context. Ethnic inequality at work has therefore a structural component as the dominant groups in society have historically decided on the value of particular competences and skills and organizational practices (such as recruitment, wage setting) create hierarchy in which ethnic (and gender) inequalities are maintained in organizations (Ackerman, 2006). Although the stress of the sociological literature is on the role of ideological structures in generating material and symbolic inequality, these insights are not completely extraneous to the more psychologically oriented literature. For instance, status theory formulates the analogous argument that status inequality between members of those groups is legitimated by associating different social identities with different levels of competence (Ridgeway & Correll, 2006). Albeit in a less explicit way, Ely and Thomas’s (2001) learning-and-integration paradigm points in a similar direction. It underlines the importance of encouraging employees to bring their entire demographic and cultural knowledge to work, despite the fact that such knowledge has been historically devalued by organizations, as this fosters a ‘diversity mindset’ among the personnel, leading to positive intergroup relations.

Most critically oriented diversity scholars take however a skeptical stance toward turning to the logic of competencies to enhance equality in organization. They warn that the essentialist and utilitarian conceptualization of identity, which is typical of the ‘business case’, will not lead to more equality (Lorbiecki & Jack, 2000; Noon, 2007). Although we agree that the valuing of multiple competencies alone is not a sufficient condition to achieve ethnic equality, we hold that it is likely to be a necessary one. Arguably, as within a capitalist logic employees are human resources functional to producing value for the organization, employees who are seen as possessing valuable competencies are in a more favorable power position vis-à-vis both the employer and employees who are seen as not possessing them. The association of ethnic minorities with valuable competencies is thus likely to reduce inequality along ethnic lines as it counters the dominant assumption about (ethnic) minorities’ low(er) competence. This is well illustrated by Zanoni and Janssens’s (2007) study of organizations which, by valuing minority employees’ competencies, offer them possibilities of ‘micro- emancipation’, despite the exploitative nature of the employment relation.

A second key marker of ethnic equality originates in Cox’s (1991, 1993) foundational model of the multicultural organization. Theoretically grounded in Gordon’s (1964) sociological work, this model argues for pluralism through the majority and the minority’s mutual acculturation. All employees should be allowed to bring their entire set of identities to work rather than be required to assimilate into the dominant culture based on the majority’s identity. The underlying idea is that power inequality originates in organizational settings which are infused with cultural norms reflecting historically dominant (ethnic) identities, foreclosing the expression of others. Many organizations remain ‘monocultural’ and require (ethnic) minorities to assimilate to such norms. Yet such expectation is not only unethical, it is also unrealistic. Studies on the experiences of ethnic
minority employees at the workplace indicate how, despite minorities’ efforts to assimilate, the majority keeps seeing them as ‘other’ (Healy, Bradley, & Forson, 2011; Ogbonna & Harris, 2006; Van Laer & Janssens, 2011). Whiteness studies have well theorized how the dominant ethnic group in society acquires its structural social, political and cultural advantage thanks to its social status. ‘White privilege’ indeed refers to the package of unearned assets which white people can count on cashing in each day (Mcintosh, 2004). These advantages derive from existing inequality structures and thus remain invisible to white people, but are obvious to non-whites. As long as unspoken cultural norms remain unquestioned, thinking about “equality and equity is kept incomplete, protecting unearned advantage and conferred dominance” (Mcintosh, 2004: 192). Acknowledging such norms is thus an essential precondition to redesign social systems such as organizations to attain structural equality.

Research design

The study site

This study is based on ten ethnically diverse organizations: a call center, a wholesale producer dealer, a logistic company, a scaffold construction company, a hospital, a transport company, a chemical company, a hotel, a home for elderly, and an NGO in development cooperation. They were investigated in a publicly funded research project aiming at fostering the employment of ethnic minorities, officially defined as nationals of countries outside the EU15 (i.e. Austria, Belgium, Denmark, Finland, France, Germany, Greece, Ireland, Italy, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, Portugal, Spain, Sweden, United Kingdom) or whose parents (minimum one) or grandparents (minimum 2) are non EU15 nationals. The organizations are small- and medium-sized companies (SMEs) in Flanders, the Dutch-speaking region of Belgium. They were identified from a list of organizations participating in a government scheme providing public funding and consulting services for implementing diversity initiatives. Selection criteria were minimal size of the organization to secure a sufficient number of interviews, and sectoral and regional spreading.

These organizations represent a particularly suitable context to look for effective DM for a number of reasons. Since Belgium has no tradition of affirmative action legislation, DM practices in Belgian organizations are less likely to be adopted for merely legal compliance. This is even more the case for SMEs, which, having less resources than larger companies, tend not to implement practices solely for window-dressing (Bacon & Hoque, 2005). Finally, it should further be observed that SMEs are particularly relevant for the employment of ethnic minorities in Europe as they account for 99.8 percent of European enterprises and 69.8 percent of total employment (European Commission, 2003).

Ethnicity in our study can be best understood as a combination of low-education, culture, religion, and language. Reflecting ethnic minorities’ disadvantaged position in the Belgian labor market, most ethnic minority employees in our ten cases were low educated and mostly employed in lower-rank jobs. As in other European countries, ethnic minorities suffer from high unemployment rates, and, when employed, are concentrated in sectors at the low end of the economy (OECD, 2008), due to their significant lower educational qualifications (OECD, 2008) as well as discrimination (Arrijn, Feld, & Nayer, 1998). Further, Flanders knows a strong societal discourse of ethnic minorities as ‘allochthons’ — from the Greek, meaning ‘from another country’ — as opposed to ‘autochthons’ — individuals with origins in the country. In the last decade, this discourse has been mainly used to refer to Muslim labor immigrants and their descendants (Ceuppens & Geschiere, 2005), who suffer from a particularly weak socio-economic position and whose social mobility has, till today, remained limited. In this discourse, minorities’ disadvantaged socio-economic position is often presented as resulting from their alleged unwillingness to learn Dutch and ‘their’ culturally specific values and behaviors. The stress on language likely derives from the historical exclusion of Dutch from the public sphere, dominated by French. In Flanders, the inability to speak Dutch retains today a strong negative connotation as it is interpreted as contempt for Flemish culture. Concerning employment relations more generally, Belgium is characterized by institutionalized collective bargaining at the sectoral level guaranteeing legally employed individuals’ minimum protection standards and wages.

The call center stood out of our ten organizations for its equality in terms of the recognition of competencies and the expression of identities. Founded in 1998, this company grew out of a socio-economic development project to stimulate the revival of an underprivileged urban area with high unemployment. Today, it is a for-profit company offering telemarketing, telephone market research and help desk services in a variety of European languages. The company has a flat organizational structure with four organizational levels: operators (151), supervisors (3), management (5), and the CEO. At the time of the study, 45 (28 percent) of the 160 employees of the call center had a foreign background, from countries like Morocco, Ghana, Turkey, Senegal, Cameroon, but also European countries such as Poland, Rumania, Italy, and Spain. This percentage is rather high as 8.2 of the total Belgian population has a foreign nationality (OECD, 2005). Most ethnic minority (97 percent) and majority (93 percent) employees worked as call operators. One of the three supervisors was Moroccan; no ethnic minority employees were in any of the few management positions. The call center’s workforce ethnic composition well reflects the composition of the Belgian workforce resulting from various waves of migration since the 1950s.

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2 This definition is used in work-related policy, as individuals with origins outside the EU15 area score remarkably lower on work-related indicators.

3 According to the EU definition, these are companies with less than 250 employees.

4 Belgium is composed of three main regions: Dutch-speaking Flanders, French-speaking Wallonia, and mainly French-speaking yet officially bilingual Brussels.

5 However, this figure is an underestimation as it does not include the population with foreign origins who has obtained the Belgian citizenship, on which no official data is available.
Method

For each of the ten companies, we collected data through semi-structured interviews and documents such as the ‘diversity plan’ drafted to benefit from government support and describing the organizations’ DM initiatives. In total, 116 interviews were conducted at the workplace during working hours. They lasted between one and two hours and were recorded and transcribed verbatim for analysis. In each case, respondents included the person responsible for DM and/or the human resource manager, managers supervising an ethnically diverse group of employees, ethnic majority employees, ethnic minority employees, and if present, representatives of the unions. The interviews aimed at exploring any organizational practice that affected ethnic (in)equality, including not only the classical DM practices but also the reason for recruiting minority employees (Kossek & Pichler, 2006), work processes (Janssens & Zanoni, 2005), and human resource practices (Chen, Chanda, D’Netto, & Monga, 2009).

The interviews were conducted by four male and female ethnic majority researchers who were part of the larger research project team led by the first author, and who were familiar with research on diversity. Drawing on our prior experience with qualitative data collection on diversity in the workplace, we drafted the interview protocol and discussed it with the interviewers. We specifically drew their attention to the vulnerable position of ethnic minority respondents and the importance of formulating questions in a simple, concrete language as many interviewees would not be speaking in their own mother tongue and some would have limited schooling. A few interviews were conducted in French. Overall, we stressed the need to engage in a dialog with informants to understand their perspective, rather than mechanically reproducing the questions. To avoid probing, we put general questions first and more specific ones on diversity later.

Data analysis was guided by the constant comparative method (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) whereby intra- and inter-case differences and similarities in the two equality markers were drawn out in relation to consistencies and variations in organizational practices. We first assessed each organization in terms of the two equality markers. We selected all interviewees’ accounts that indicated whether or not employees felt valued for their competencies and referred to the ability or inability of expressing their identities at work and discussed them jointly.

We then identified the organizational practices related to the two markers. To do so, we focused on the transcribed data which explicitly referred to practices that were mentioned by interviewees as relevant to managing an ethnically diverse workforce or as influencing minority and majority employees’ working experience. We did not rely here on an a priori definition of ethnicity to include/exclude practices but rather incorporated all practices that respondents mentioned when asked about ethnic minorities, such as religion, language, skin color, and weak labor market position. Within each case, we checked the mentioned practices across interviewees and how the organization’s diversity policy was described in the documents but found only minor discrepancies. For instance, in one organization, accounts by both minority and majority employees pointed to a laissez-faire approach that negatively influenced their work experience, yet this practice was (unsurprisingly) not mentioned by managers. We decided to incorporate all practices identified by at least two types of respondents or data sources in our analysis. Table 1 presents an overview of the results of our analysis for all cases in our sample, indicating for each case its equality outcome in terms of the two markers and the set of identified organizational practices.

In the results section below, we focus our analysis on the set of practices of the call center. However, to understand how the practices of this organization foster equality, we selectively compare them with those implemented in the other nine organizations and report their less positive/negative effects on the two equality markers. This analytical approach allows developing an in-depth, nuanced analysis of a best case organization without losing the explanatory power of a cross-case comparative design (Eisenhardt & Graebner, 2007).

Results

All the information we collected at the call center pointed to a company characterized by a high degree of ethnic equality. The words of a supervisor of Moroccan origins are illustrative of respondents’ accounts:

The different backgrounds are enriching. I do not see that somebody is black, disabled, etc. We are family. Here its lively, warm, thanks to differences. There is solidarity and togetherness. Also, the different nationalities make us multilingual, a great advantage for this organization.

Equality was achieved by means of a virtuous combination of organizational practices. Some of these practices — a business/social recruitment policy, teamwork in multi-ethnic teams, a competency-based job classification and a developmental evaluation system — valued multiple competencies, while others — multicultural practices, a two-language policy and a flexible work schedule policy — enabled the expression of multiple identities.

Practices valuing multiple competencies

A business/social recruitment policy

A first practice crucial to valuing multiple competencies was the call center’s recruitment policy based on both business and social criteria. Specialized in multilingual services, the company considered ethnic minorities’ linguistic skills a strategic asset to deliver its services internationally. The CEO told us:

We are multilingual and work with native speakers. People who really speak their mother tongue are crucial in our industry. This way we can deliver services in most European languages. For instance, an American company was looking for somebody here to open the European market for them. They came to us because we had the language knowledge they needed. We have the basic languages: French, Dutch, English, German, Italian, Portuguese, Spanish, Romanian, Polish, etc.

At the same time, the company offered employment to particularly vulnerable individuals in the labor market such as migrant female single parents, political refugees, and
Table 1  Ethnic equality at the ten cases and their organizational practices.

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<td>Call center</td>
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<td>Valuing multiple competencies</td>
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<td>Expression of multiple identities</td>
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<td>Focus of organizational practice</td>
<td>Ethnic minorities in same jobs as majority colleagues in ethnically mixed project teams, having both individual and common goals</td>
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<td>Work design and ethnic minorities’ position within it</td>
<td>Competence-based job classification, consisting of developmental stages of skill acquisition</td>
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<td>Job classification</td>
<td>Developmental newcomers’ introduction</td>
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<td>Newcomers’ introduction</td>
<td>Recruitment for ethnic minorities’ language skills and motivation as well as offering them chance to work</td>
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<td>Job evaluation</td>
<td>Developmental performance appraisal focused on improving one particular skill</td>
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<td>Recruitment</td>
<td>Recruitment for ethnic minorities’ language skills and motivation as well as offering them chance to work</td>
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<td>Work design and ethnic minorities’ position within it</td>
<td>Ethnic minorities in same jobs as majority colleagues in ethnically mixed permanent teams</td>
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<td>Newcomers’ introduction</td>
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<td>Job evaluation</td>
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<td>Recruitment</td>
<td>Recruitment based on availability rationale</td>
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<td>Change of team member composition if within team conflict</td>
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persons with disability. This policy was based on the double idea that they deserved to get a chance to work and that they would be more committed and loyal to the company than somebody with better employment chances:

For example, if four candidates are all good, we look at their specific situations. The Belgian is 25 years old and just got out of school. The African is 45, a refugee. We ask ourselves: ‘Who of the two experiences the most difficulties in the labor market?’ And then we would say, let’s take the African. The other is as good but has more chances. That’s the philosophy behind it (manager).

Our people really choose for this job and want to make something of it. They are proud of what they do. This positively affects the performance, how they are, their communication. They make more effort to come to an outstanding result than somebody who’s just passing by (CEO).

This recruitment policy effectively acknowledged and valued the linguistic and motivational competencies of its diverse workforce. Despite its clear business rationale, it was strongly appreciated both by ethnic minority and majority employees, as illustrated by the following quotes:

They need us because of our native language is French but they also want to give us a chance. We really feel they want to give us foreigners a chance to work. They [management] don’t say that officially, but you see that. Because there are many foreigners here. So, it’s not just business, it’s also a choice. Also the Belgians who work here have a hard time finding a job. . . . It’s not easy for me to find work here, surely not as a foreigner and as I don’t speak Dutch, and surely as a black (laughs). Really, people have a lot of negative prejudices. I have been looking for a job in several places but when there is that negative prejudice, you don’t have a chance. That’s very disappointing. So, when I could start working here, I really took that chance very seriously (operator of Senegalese origins).

This company has a special regime. How or what, I don’t know exactly, but in any case, a special goal to be open for those who have less chances, to focus especially on them. On the phone, you don’t see who is on the line. It’s not just people of a foreign origin. Here, you have for instance a lot of fat people, if I may put it bluntly. That’s also a handicap when you look for a job, just as skin color (operator of Belgian origins).

Despite its clear business rationale, this practice redefines competencies in a way that values those of a diverse workforce, fostering ethnic equality in the organization. Rather than using education and previous working experience as signs of competence — as organizations generally do, resulting in the exclusion of ethnic minority candidates —, the call center stresses language skills, motivation and loyalty. While reflecting the exploitative nature of the employment relation, this practice structurally redefines the organizational understanding of who is a ‘good candidate’, countering the dominant representation of ethnic minorities as lacking
competencies (cf. MacKenzie & Forde, 2009; Zanoni & Janssens, 2004) and resulting in occupational chances for ethnic minorities (and, more broadly, disadvantaged candidates). This does not often occur in Flemish organizations, which generally either discriminate and exclude ethnic minorities or hire them as second-best workers merely to solve the shortage of majority candidates. Indeed, the other organizations in our sample at best stressed avoiding discriminating on the basis of ethnicity in recruitment.

Teamwork in multi-ethnic teams
A practice that further contributed to valuing multiple competencies was the organization of work in multi-ethnic teams with both individual and collective goals. Operators were instructed in teams and then independently called customers by phone. This individually carried out task was embedded in project teams, where operators helped and coached each other by sharing their expertise and insights, enabling the achievement of both individual and common targets. The following quotes are illustrative:

In the team meetings, we discuss the best way to sell, what can be improved in the calls, changes... Team members can make suggestions. We look together for the best manner to sell a product. If the client has comments, we also discuss them... People learn from each other, they coach each other and exchange tips (female operator of Moroccan origins).

[Work as a call operator] is individual work, but it becomes team work from the moment that you have the opportunity to listen to different experiences. We help each other. If somebody for instance is not reaching her sale targets, then we can ask each other: ‘How are you doing that?’ We all help each other out. We work as a team (female operator of Turkish origins).

This work design makes competencies of ethnic minorities (and of all employees) visible to co-workers. It fosters ethnic equality because, similar to the recruitment policy, it undermines the societal ideology of minorities as less competent workers (cf. MacKenzie & Forde, 2009; Zanoni & Janssens, 2004). The key role of this collaborative work arrangement in fostering this equality marker was confirmed by comparison with the other organizations in our sample. For instance, where ethnic minorities were concentrated in low-status jobs in a sequential workflow — e.g. the wholesale produce dealer, the logistic company and the hospital — minority and majority workers interacted largely when minorities made mistakes, interrupting the flow of activities. As a result, in these organizations, minorities were perceived as less competent than majority employees, in line with prevailing stereotypes in Flemish society at large.

A competency-based job classification and developmental evaluation system
At the same time, a competency-based job classification and a developmental evaluation system enabled the call center to value multiple competencies by highlighting their potential rather than their shortcomings. The organization used a competency-based job classification consisting of four stages of skill acquisition. This practice allowed to define employees’ jobs based on their individual strengths and preferences. For instance, an operator with local background told us:

I’m strong in helpdesk, less in sales. They know that I like to hold longer calls; I haven’t yet received a remark about that... they also have their goals, want to reach a certain percentage but if they hear that somebody is very good in serving the customer, then it’s less important if you have sold or not; you gave good customer service. And there are other criteria for all calls... And this way, everybody is good in something.

At the highest competence level, employees could decide themselves whether to work on several projects or focus on one, and they were free to change their preference over time.

Practices with an evaluative component focused on an individualized learning process in which employees could grow at their own pace, according to their own potential, rather than along an absolute norm. For instance, after the introduction, newcomers were not monitored for a while to allow them to learn the job at ease. Our respondents experienced this practice as highly supportive:

In the beginning, they make you feel at ease. Here, it is really so that they don’t force you. When you start working here, you don’t know a thing, it’s all new. And if they then force you in all these things: ‘You need to do that in that way and this and that...’ They did say: ‘I hope you will get good results’, but they didn’t push, pushing, no, that doesn’t happen here. Of course, if you have no results, then they will tell you: ‘Look, this can better, and that can better’, but not in terms like... they really welcome you here (operator of Moroccan origins).

Interviewees also referred to developmental performance appraisals focused on their achievements and identifying, if necessary, only one aspect for improvement at once. Thanks to this orientation toward personal improvement, they felt able to do their job and experienced a sense of value:

They correct you in a way that you become better every time. They say: ‘You can better do it like this, when you talk with a customer, and avoid saying this or that’ (operator of Turkish origins).

Managers indicated that these practices were meant to enhance and broaden employees’ skills. They further described how providing constructive feedback helped them to become more self-confident and assertive, fostering not only their performance but also their personal development. For instance, the female supervisor of Moroccan origins told us:

There are many aspects of a person that change when somebody starts working here, in terms of motivation, character. There are people who come in who are very insecure, but who now have much more punch. Some operators were very timid, but they evolved completely. We also do individual coaching. When somebody is shy, afraid, or cries when being yelled at by a customer, we provide individual support.

These practices further redefine the organizational understanding of what are ‘valuable competencies’. They emphasize a multiplicity of competencies, focusing on employees’
strengths, potential and individual improvement (cf. Clifton & Harter, 2003). By broadening the norms on competencies and performance, various individual developmental paths were created, letting all employees experience that they were valued for what they could contribute to the organization. This approach stands in strong contrast to other organizations where (ethnic minority) employees were evaluated through a ‘meritocratic’ system based on mere compliant behavior (i.e. coming on time, being a disciplined worker) – e.g. chemical company, logistic company — or arbitrarily – e.g. wholesale produce dealer.

**Practices enabling the expression of multiple identities**

**Multicultural practice**

Several practices at the call center fostered equality by allowing the expression of multiple identities. We discuss them here together as they all contribute to enforcing multicultural norms in the organization rather than ethnic majority ones. For instance, the call center allowed religious symbols and practices at work. Muslim respondents mentioned the importance of being allowed to pray and to wear a headscarf. For example, a Muslim female worker told us:

> For the girls who wear a headscarf, it’s really good that they are allowed to. That they don’t have to take it off, ‘cause I know it’s very hard for them. It’s good for them, that they don’t need to change that.

Also, the fasting hours during Ramadan were publicly communicated so that everybody knew when practicing Muslim employees would take a break to eat. According to the managers, this enhanced ethnic majority employees’ understanding and support for their fasting colleagues. The symbolic power of this religion-friendly policy can be fully appreciated only by comparison with the other cases, where these expressions were forbidden, reflecting the ethnic majority norm that expressions of one’s faith — especially of non-Christian ones — are inappropriate in the workplace.

To ensure that all employees were able to express their identities, the call center further implemented a strict anti-discrimination policy. From the female supervisor of Moroccan origins, we learned that a temporary ethnic majority was fired because she had made racist remarks on her. Other ethnic minority and majority respondents confirmed this strict anti-discrimination policy. Some interviewees mentioned that the company made it clear already during the recruitment process:

> Here you run into all colors, foreign origins, everything. If you don’t feel at ease with people with other origins, then you are not going to start here, you wouldn’t get through the first interview, your eyes would fall out. . . . It’s expected, although it’s not required to become best friends or so. I think that they say it explicitly in the beginning: ‘We have people like this and like that here, do you think you fit here?’ (ethnic majority operator)

This anti-discrimination policy signaled to employees that the company would use its power position when employees showed no respect for the manifestations of other employees’ identities. In the other companies, discriminatory behavior was tolerated — wholesale produce dealer—or solved by assigning the involved employees to another unit — e.g. scaffold construction company, chemical company.

Finally, also enabling the expression of employees’ multiple identities were the call center’s multicultural social activities. Organized on a regular basis, often to celebrate the end of a project, they created opportunities for ethnic minority respondents to bring their own music and dishes to a drink. Respondents emphasized that there were no specific ‘ethnic’ evenings but that this was something ‘normal’ to do.

An operator of Moroccan origins recounted:

> There are often social events and then we go out together. We once went bowling until midnight. Next to it was Café Ile Afrique. I said, I know a bar here and then we all went there. They [colleagues] liked it, we started dancing in an African way. We laughed, we stayed until 4am. . . . we also went once to a Moroccan bar, or we go dance rai music. Everybody was there, and everybody was Moroccan that day, we laughed a lot. It was fantastic.

Such social activities create space for the expression of multiple cultural identities. In contrast, other organizations — e.g. hotel, nursing home, transport company — also organized social activities for their personnel, yet these reflected ethnic majority’s common leisure activities, such as BBQs and bowling, hereby creating a monocultural organization. Overall, the various multicultural practices are in line with Cox’s (1991) idea of the multicultural organization, allowing for multiple expressions of religious and cultural identities rather than imposing the ethnic majority norm on all employees.

**Two-language policy**

A second practice enabling the expression of multiple identities was the two-language policy allowing French as the second working language next to Dutch. As French was spoken by many ethnic minorities, employees were allowed to use it and all official documents were translated in both languages. This practice provided the possibility to express oneself in the language in which one felt most comfortable. For instance, an operator of Moroccan origins said:

> . . . it’s easier for people to talk another language every now and then. Above all French and Dutch. If you can’t speak Dutch very well, but you can understand, then it can happen that you talk French to me and I answer back in Dutch to you.

The CEO presented the two-language policy as “a matter of being polite” when working with a multilingual workforce. The same politeness principle applied to ethnic minorities, who were not allowed to speak their native language at work, a frequent cause of inter-group conflict in the organizations in our study. The symbolic power of including French as an official language in the work place is particularly strong in the Flemish context, where language remains a particularly sensitive political issue. Indeed, all other organizations only allowed Dutch on the work floor.

**A flexible work schedule policy**

A last practice allowing the expression of multiple identities was the call center’s flexible work schedule policy. All employees could obtain flexible schedules for a variety of
personal needs and requests, independent of whether they were related to care, religion, family or other. An ethnic majority operator told us:

Our work schedules are adjusted to our needs, because of small children or any other kind of reason...we can almost decide ourselves.

Ethnic minority interviewees were highly appreciative of this practice as it allowed them to take an extra day of vacation during Ramadan or take longer vacation to travel to their countries of origin. As the company did not close its operations around Christmas, non-Christian employees could keep working and save their vacation days for their own religious holidays.

This individual-centered flexibility policy treated a broad variety of requests as equally legitimate, allowing all employees to arrange working hours in ways that were compatible not only with religious practices but also, more broadly, with their other social roles outside work. In this way, the organization refrained from only considering ethnic majority requests to be legitimate requests. This practice was implemented in five of the ten organizations under study, and facilitated in all of them the expression of multiple identities (cf. Kamenou, 2008). Often, the flexibility policy was presented by managers as compensating employees’ own flexibility in function of the employer’s needs. The call center, however, tried to limit flexibility demands on employees. The company had for instance refused to extend working hours into the evening, anticipating the difficulties this would have caused to employees with caring responsibilities.

Discussion

Driven by our concern to envision possibilities for an alternative DM within the constraints of capitalist organizations, this study aimed at advancing the current knowledge on equality-fostering DM. We are aware that the call center case might appear to the critical reader fairy tale-like, especially in the light of the literature on work and employment conditions in call centers (Bain & Taylor, 2000; Fleming & Sturdy, 2011; Knights & McCabe, 2003) and the exploitation of ethnic minorities and migrants (Anderson & Ruh, 2010; MacKenzie & Forde, 2009). Still, the DM practices we identified were clearly exceptionally innovative and coherent, recognized by respondents in various positions and supported by other available data sources.

Reflecting on our empirical results, we propose two important ways in which the organizational practices we identified effectively foster ethnic equality. On the one hand, they broaden the norms on both competences and identities. On the other, they approach ethnic minority employees as full subjects. Hereunder, we first discuss these key insights in the light of the existing DM literature and then indicate their contribution to the critical diversity literature. Our argument is that, in order to foster ethnic equality within organizations, diversity management should not only address unequal power relations between ethnic majority and minority groups, as generally pled (cf. Linnehan & Konrad, 1999) but also address the (culturally defined) relationship between the employer and employees.

Alternative diversity management: countering societal, institutionalized ethnic inequality

A main insight that emerges from our study is that equality-fostering DM is about broadening norms on competences and identities, countering societal, institutionalized understandings of ethnic minorities both as workers and as ethnic minorities. Our most equal organization, the call center, refuses to apply institutionalized categorical identities (and the relations between them) that are dominant in the surrounding society within its own boundaries. This is crucial as, according to Tilly (1989), such imitation is precisely one of the key mechanisms of the reproduction of inequality along socio-demographic lines. Organizations tend to copy social structures including unequal categorical relations from other locations because they are familiar, decreasing individuals’ transaction costs of learning them (not because they are inherently better in terms of efficiency). Our ‘best case’ though refuses to just imitate. Rather, it redefines its understanding of ethnic minority employees so that representations of the ‘normal/ideal worker’ in the organization are destabilized (Benschop, 2001; Ostendorp & Steyaert, 2009; Prasad & Mills, 1997) and ethnic minority workers are no longer constructed as deviations from the dominant norm. It does so by broadening norms which offer multiple positionings that are less hierarchical in value.

In particular, the recruitment, job classification and evaluation practices in the call center redefine the organizational understanding of what valuable competencies are and, therefore, who is a good candidate and what is good performance. Such broadened norms foster equality as they challenge the societal assumption that ethnic minorities are less competent. Instead of merely reproducing inequalities within the organizational boundaries (Acker, 2006), contributing to their institutionalization, the broadened norms enacted through the practices of the HR cycle decrease inequalities. Paraphrasing Liff and Wajcman’s (1996) argument that gender equality will not be achieved as long as the “perceptions of job requirements and procedures for assessing merit [are] saturated with gendered assumptions” (1996, p. 89), we argue that ethnic equality will not be achieved as long as the perceptions of job requirements and procedures for assessing merit are saturated with cultural assumptions. The work design further plays a key facilitating role in enforcing broadened norms on competences in the every-day functioning of the organization. Specifically concerning the call center, multi-ethnic teams made ethnic minority employees’ contributions to work visible to all, countering the predominant ideology of ethnic minorities as less competent.

Similarly, the broader norms on cultural identities enforced by the practices of allowing religious symbols, two official languages, flexible work schedules and the strict non-discrimination policy make room for the expression of a broader variety of identities. Refraining from an ethnocentric judgment of religious practices, language use and requests worthy of accommodation, the organization avoided reproducing monocultural, institutionalized norms within its borders. Rather, it opened space for multiple identities. This is of particular significance to ethnic minorities whose cultural expressions are often considered illegitimate both at work and in other public spheres (Modood, Triandafyllidou, & Zapata-Barrero, 2006).
DM practices that broaden norms and offer multiple understandings of competence and multiple identity positions are effective in fostering ethnic equality because they subvert Western perceptions of ‘otherness’ in terms of, ethnicities, ‘races’, cultures, religions etc. Specifically, they destabilize the dominant hierarchical system of binaries which values the ethnic majority over the ethnic minority in work settings: e.g. skilled/unskilled, productive/unproductive, and thus valuable/valueless. As argued by postcolonial theory, such system serves to conceptually overturn the West into a position of ontological superiority over the Orient (Prasad, 2006; Said, 1978). The pervasive structural inequality sustained by these collectively shared linguistic categories cannot be corrected at the level of individuals’ cognition — for instance through training —, as individuals rely on them to make sense of social reality and act upon it. Inequality rather needs to be addressed by changing the discursive structures through organizational practices and processes at the core of the organization.

The destabilization of hierarchically ordered binary categories further opens up novel possibilities for DM because it allows the organization to address ethnic minorities as employees, rather than as members of ethnic minority groups. By replacing binaries with multiple positioning, diversity is normalized and the needs of ethnic minority employees can be cast as analogous to those of ethnic majority ones, rather than automatically ascribed to their specific ethnic background. The advantage of this approach is that ethnic minority employees are no longer essentialistically reduced to mere representatives of a stigmatized social group but are approached as ‘full’ subjects, a key condition for equality (cf. Zanoni & Janssens, 2004).

This point throws new light on the debate on whether DM should rest on broad or narrow definition of diversity (Prasad et al., 2006). Critically oriented diversity scholars have traditionally argued that, to be effective in promoting equality, DM should focus on identity axes along which inequality has historically been structured, such as gender, ethnicity or sexual orientation (Holvino & Kamp, 2009; Liff, 1997; Linnehan & Konrad, 1999). Yet, the problem with a ‘target group’ policy grounded on existing categories of employees as members of historically subordinate social groups is that it inevitably reproduces reified representations of minority employees (Jones & Stablein, 2006; Litvin, 1997; Zanoni & Janssens, 2004). Its emancipatory purposes are undermined because the predominant negative representations of minority employees are perpetuated, denying them subjectivity and agency. In this sense, the destabilization of identity categories constitutes in itself a political act (cf. Butler, 1990; Yeatsman, 1990), as it helps achieve the delicate balance between “recogniz[ing] otherness while making space for individual experiences beyond categorization” (Ghorashi & Sabelis, 2013: p. 83).

Alternative diversity management and its contribution to critical diversity literature

The critical diversity literature has traditionally viewed capitalist organizations as maintaining and reproducing ethnic inequality (Noon, 2010; Zanoni & Janssens, 2004) and considered DM as a particular tool to this end (Prasad, 2006). Our study however suggests that a capitalist organization can potentially be a site of social change, contributing to combat ethnic inequality.

Until now, the diversity literature has largely discussed power along socio-demographic identity groups, or the historical relation between minority and majority groups resulting in their unequal access to resources (Linnehan & Konrad, 1999; Pringle et al., 2006). The argument is that “integroup power relationships constitute a fundamental issue that diversity initiatives must engage to be effective” (Linnehan & Konrad, 1999, p. 400). Although this is necessary, we argue that it might not be sufficient to foster equality, as an exclusive focus on intergroup power relations tends to obscure the specific role of the (majority) employer in reproducing (or countering) inequality. In other words, by conceiving power along socio-demographic identity lines, the power of management is seen as originating solely in its membership to the dominant identity group. Management is cast as powerful because managers largely belong to the cultural ‘majority’, thus similarly to majority employees.

Our findings however strongly indicate that management is powerful also by virtue of its position in the employment relation, which grants it power over labor. This power can be effectively used to redefine the employment relation in ways that no longer match the profile of ethnic majority labor, avoiding the indirect discrimination of minorities. The employer can namely craft an employment relationship in which multiple competences are valued and multiple identity positions are offered and enforced in all its practices. As a result, an ‘alternative’ organizational space is created where all employees’ contributions are valued and differences are normalized, and where all employees are expected to comply with broadened norms (rather than asking only minority employees to unilaterally adjust and assimilate to historical majority employment norms). So, paradoxically, it is its by virtue of its power over an ethnically diverse labor that the call center is able to increase ethnic equality within that same labor and, at the same time, to harvest the business gains of doing so. In this sense, the practices of the call center radically question institutionalized power relations along ethnacity, but less fundamentally those along class, which are constitutive of capitalistic organizing.

In the light of our result, we argue that to understand the dynamics of diversity and envision practices fostering ethnic equality, organizations should be conceptualized at once as expressions of cultural majority norms and as expressions of capital within the employment relation. This double lens is indispensable to account for the complexities of power in real organizational settings and address them effectively through DM. Such insight echoes the argument of intersectionality scholars for researching and practicing more forcefully and intentionally the simultaneity of identities such a race, gender, ethnicity, nationality, sexuality and class in organizations (Holvino, 2010; McCall, 2005; Munro, 2001). Specifically, our study brings to the foreground that to open up new possibilities for understanding diversity management and to challenge (in)equality in organizations we need to interlock ethnicity in the employer–employee relationship, or class.
The (im)possibilities of alternative diversity management in capitalist organizations: a future research agenda

With this study we have presented one ‘best case’ organization fostering ethnic equality by crafting broader norms on competencies and identities. The capacity of this organization to challenge institutionalized inequality raises a whole new set of important research questions for diversity scholars. Considering the boundary conditions of the call center, we propose the following directions.

Scholars may in the first instance examine what motivates and drives an organization to enact multiple novel practices rather than merely imitating dominant practices which institutionalize inequality. In our case, the origins of the call center in a socio-economic development project likely played a key role in its capacity to envision novel practices that attempt to align business needs with ethnic equality. This calls for studying organizations which have an explicit social goal next to a business one, such as organizations within the socio-profit sector. To date, this literature remains rather limited (yet see Kalonnaitye, 2010; Tomlinson & Schwabenland, 2010). But research may also focus on leadership within profit organizations to study why an organization refuses to imitate social structures, hereby identifying the values and motives that initiate an organizational understanding of desirable practices toward broader norms on competencies and identities. Insights on this matter may raise important implications (as well as research) for how change agents such as diversity managers can help organizations consciously enact alternatives to monocultural practices and norms.

Second, scholars may want to explore organizational characteristics that facilitate the crafting of broader norms on competencies and identities. We suspect that in our case the small size and flat structure facilitated the enforcement of alternative, broader norms throughout the organization. In larger, hierarchical organizations, there is often a wider slack in the implementation of official policies. Valuing a broader variety of competencies is also likely to be more difficult when wage and benefits differences between the low and high ranks are large. Future research may therefore want to search for larger, more hierarchical ‘best case’ organizations and investigate how organizational characteristics facilitate or hinder organizations in their capacity to establish equality-fostering practices. In doing so, we invite scholars to take an intersectional approach as many organizational factors point precisely to the relevance of the employment relation (i.e. ‘class’) to foster equality.

Further, future research may want to consider the broader institutional conditions that facilitate the redefinition and enactment of the employment relationship toward more equal ethnic norms. We suspect that the relatively high degree of workers’ protection characterizing the Belgian labor market (e.g. minimum wage and an institutionalized system of collective agreements on wages, benefits and employment conditions mainly at the sectoral level) might be important as it enables single organizations to build the employment relation on other aspects than wage. In contrast, when wages are negotiated at the organizational level, they likely become the core aspect around which the employment relationship is built. Diversity scholars therefore may want to investigate whether overall workers’ protection institutions represent a precondition for equality-fostering organizational practices to emerge, as if this is the case, political efforts should better be enlarged to include not only anti-discrimination legislation but also more general workers’ rights (cf. Harvey, 1993).

Finally, future research may benefit from simultaneously using multiple markers to assess equality. In our study, we focused on the two structural equality markers of valuing multiple competences and allowing multiple identities, which are suitable to assess ethnic equality when there is a large gap in formal qualifications between the ethnic majority and the ethnic minority and thus more rank-sensitive measures would skew results. However, when minority and majority employees have similar educational profiles, we recommend research to consider adding to these two markers the ‘classical’ structural indicators of power re-distribution, such as the degree of horizontal and vertical segregation. This will allow diversity scholars to gain a fuller and more fine-grained understanding of the way novel practices reshape power relations and thus (in)equality.

In the aftermath of this study, the question remains under which conditions alternative business models can emerge in capitalist organization. Despite our prudence toward the very possibility of equality in such organizations, we invite critical diversity scholars to take a tempered radical stance and not to give up the search for organizational practices calling into question institutionalized inequality.

References


