

Skirts, sarees and sarongs: the rhetoric and reality behind the celebration of diversity in organisational life

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Abstract: The article critically examines the ethos of the diversity movement in organisational life. The rationale for the diversity agenda is located within a particular turn taken by the philosophies of liberalism and multiculturalism. This results in the extreme idea that one ought not to criticise the ways and views of others – whatever they are. Instead, one ought to celebrate and accept them. Through an engagement with the literature, it is shown that in many cases, behind the egalitarian ethos espoused by the diversity agenda, one finds the ethics of the spreadsheet. It is argued that the point proudly proclaimed by the diversity movement, that it is apolitical, is what makes it ineffectual.

Keywords: diversity; diversity management; Elias; ethics; liberalism; multiculturalism.

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1 Introduction

Whilst reading a book on diversity in organisational life, I paused as I read the sentence: 'Both approaches [to diversity issues] have strengths' (Hays-Thomas, 2004, p.12). I had 'stumbled' because my expectation was to read the more usual phrase: 'Both approaches have strengths and weaknesses'. As I immersed myself further in the literature on diversity, it rapidly became apparent that this was no slip of the pen, but an expression of the ethos of the diversity movement as promoted in organisational life. The ethos being that one should not criticise any point of view; one should celebrate, understand and accept all points of view regardless, else one would be being oppressive.

In what follows I will look at how and why this peculiar one-sided situation has come about (a situation that does more harm than good) to become the norm for those promoting diversity programmes in organisations.

A danger in writing a paper critical of aspects of diversity is that the critique could be used to give succour to the racist, or those who cry ‘political correctness’ in order to stifle challenges to the current order of things. I strongly agree that there are many anomalies in regards to equality in the workplace. There are serious issues to be thought about as to how and why only some ‘kinds’ of individuals appear to make the grade and other kinds hit ‘the glass ceiling’. All of this is beyond question and dispute.

My points of contention are to do with the ways in which the problem is conceptualised by the diversity agenda, and the proposed solutions that follow from those conceptualisations. For example, given that the whole discourse concerns itself with ‘kinds’ of persons, how is this notion understood? How convincing is the egalitarian ethos promulgated by the diversity experts, and what is its basis? These are some of the questions that this article will critically engage with, and through that process offer alternative conceptualisations. It should be said at the start that these alternatives are not ‘neat’. However, I will argue that the ‘untidiness’ is intrinsic to the complexity of human social existence, and that there is no point of arrival in equality heaven, as many diversity change programmes claim they can achieve. In my view, there are no ‘solutions’, only ongoing struggle, and therefore, continually struggle we must.

2 Liberalism

The diversity agenda emerges out of a particular turn taken by some streams of liberalism – and it is here that I will begin. There are two varieties of liberalism, one grounded in Enlightenment values, and the other grounded in the ethos of the Romantic movement (Appiah 2005; Grayling, 2007).

Enlightenment liberalism valorises the universal individual – one stripped of all social categories. It does this to ensure that one is not influenced by status differentials. In the eyes of the law, there is to be no difference between prince and pauper. Fundamental to liberalism are the notions of privacy, ownership and freedom. Whilst liberalism agrees to reluctantly to police what goes on between individuals, it does so as minimally as possible in order to allow individuals maximum freedom. Liberalism does its utmost to stay out of the private arena in which individuals are free to believe and act according to the dictates of their conscience. It is also the case that one is conceived to have ‘rights’ over one’s property and this too is sacrosanct.

However, when we look at society, we do not see the egalitarian milieu that Enlightenment liberalism sought to foster. Not only do we find that some individuals prosper more than others (which is acceptable to the liberal ethos), but also certain types of individuals prosper more than others – men more than women, whites more than blacks, Protestants more than Catholics and so on.

In consequence, a new kind of legislation is drawn up: anti-discriminatory legislation. What is significant about this new variety of legislation is that it is aimed at categories of belonging (e.g. Race Relations Act, 1976). This kind of legislation could be said to be anti-liberal in its ethos, because in speaking to categories of belonging, this legislation goes against the Enlightenment liberal strategy of deliberately blinding itself to social categories.

This new version of liberalism draws on the Romantic worldview which came to think that cultures too were living things (Banton, 1987). The rights accruing to individuals came to be transposed onto the bounded entities called cultures. Cultures not only ‘owned’ their cultural practices, it was their duty to express these practices in order to be true to themselves. In addition, those outside a culture had no jurisdiction or right to comment on what goes on inside it – because it is private and belongs to another.

There are two ironies to be noted in regards to culture. First, liberalism having begun by assiduously avoiding giving any weight to categories of belonging, it comes eventually to be their champion. And second, cultural practices can never be private; ways of dressing, speaking and behaving are all take place in public spaces. The significance of these ‘ironies’ will become apparent as the article proceeds.

2.1 Multiculturalism

Multiculturalism arose as a reaction to the legacy of cultural imperialism that was endemic to the colonialist era. In this time, the ways of colonised were thought primitive and so to be replaced with the more civilised ways of the conqueror. In reaction, multiculturalism enjoins us to respect the other’s culture, and tolerate their differences from us. It encourages us to accept people whether they are wearing sarees, skirts or sarongs – because all are equally valid. Thus, their adage: equal but different.

The multiculturalists believe that strife arises between groups out of ignorance; further, that it is ‘natural’ for people to be frightened of strangers and their strange ways, because one does not understand the reasons for their ways. It concludes that if one got to understand the basis of their ways, then one would be less likely to feel hostility towards them. Hope in the multiculturalist vision is located in rationality – in education through familiarisation (Parekh, 2006).

2.2 Anti-racism

The anti-racist movements of the 1980s in Great Britain charged the multiculturalists for having too benign an analysis of the situation (Sivanandan, 1983). They claimed that it was not ignorance, but group interests that fuelled divides in order to exclude some groupings from full participation in the socio-economic life of communities. Then, Racism was a means of furthering the group interests of the whites. The anti-racists supposed that all human beings were capable of prejudice, but only those with sufficient power to actualise that prejudice could be construed as racists. The argument continued, only whites have power, and so only they could be racist. Whilst there was much of substance in this critique of multiculturalism, some anti-racists painted too black and white a world – a world sharply divided between victims and perpetrators of racism.

Anti-racism was a much more uncomfortable movement than multiculturalism. To the anti-racist we are not equal in our differences, there are power differentials. They said that first of all, political work needs to be done to achieve material equality, and once this is achieved then we might, perhaps, think about respecting each other’s differences. It put the white liberal on the defensive, so much so that s/he collapsed into a state of guilt. It is this collapse that is the source of many of the contradictions and difficulties that we are faced with in the diversity discourses today.

Although anti-racism tended to paint an either/or picture, many of the social changes that came about in the latter half of the 20th century, nevertheless came about because of anti-racism rather than multiculturalism.

3 The diversity agenda

The overt reason as to why the idea of diversity has come to 'replace' these prior movements is as follows. Many other marginalised groupings (say wheel chair users) found that their needs were not been spoken for. The diversity agenda claims to speak for all varieties of difference. This in itself must be a good thing. However, the way that diversity has come to be taken up in organisational life is problematic.

But why is it that the idea of diversity has been so readily embraced by the corporations given that they have been very reluctant to engage with prior emancipatory movements? Here are several possible reasons.

First, the rhetoric of diversity is much more up beat. Confrontation is replaced with celebration.

“[In the diversity approach] differences are best seen as assets to be valued and affirmed, rather than as problems to be solved ... The 'diversity' approach seeks to tackle discrimination by presenting differences as positives to be benefited from, rather than the basis of negative, unfair discrimination” (Thompson 2001, p.35).

The second, more challenging possibility, is this: The pale males¹ sitting comfortably within the portals of power would feel excluded and threatened by the prior movements, because if they were successful it would result in the pale males having a smaller share of the cake. It is the ones in powerful positions (leaders) that control the chequebooks, and so it is they that have to be initially convinced in order for any diversity experts/consultants to be employed at all. The diversity idea succeeds where others have failed because (they claim) the diversity process is going to be a good thing for the already privileged as much as anyone else. If I am right in this idea, then one could say that the notion of diversity has succeeded in entering the corporation by smoothing the ruffled feathers of the pale male at the gate.

It is curious that the diversity experts appear to be so blind to the possibility that the 'resistance' of the already privileged to this kind of change process is born of the self-interest:

“If Americans were to become more educated ... they might come to embrace the policy with vigor, but many of them appear to have resisted education ... which is why scholars have found a strong association between prejudice and resistance to affirmative action among the privileged” (Stockdale and Cao, 2004, pp.306–307; italics added).

This belief follows the multiculturalist view noted earlier, that conflict is born of misunderstanding. In their view, the only explanation possible for this 'irrational' resistance is ignorance (Crosby, Ferdman and Wingate, 2001). However, it is not the case that Americans² are resisting education, rather they are resisting giving up on the privileges they accrue from the positions they inhabit. This blindness on the part of diversity experts is doubly curious because they are not shy of citing self-interest as the critical driver for increasing diversity in organisations.

The third reason arises from the current fashionable status of complexity thinking in management literature, and in the simplistic way it is often taken up (e.g. Wheatley, 1992). The idea that novelty emerges unpredictably from a mix of things, makes the notion of diversity appealing. In fact it becomes an idealisation: the more organisations diversify, the more novelty they will produce and the more profit they will make. The more novelty they produce, the better they will fare in relation to their competitors. The notion of diversity is also venerated for similar reasons by those espousing the systemic idea of multiperspective thinking (e.g. Morgan, 1998).

The fourth reason is because the notion of diversity is easily misused to promote individualism. It is true that every individual is unique – physically and psychologically – else we would not be able to recognise each other. This then is used to say that every individual is diverse from every other. When used in this sense, then the notion of diversity fits in well with the ethos of the individual heroic leader that abounds in much organisational discourse. Now, groupings of people disappear from view, and we find ourselves back with something that looks like the original individualistic premises of Enlightenment liberalism, *but this time without its moral basis*.

The fifth possibility has to do with public image. In the current social climate, companies are increasingly being judged not only by how much profit they make, but also by how socially responsible they are. Reputation becomes an asset, and so, many companies are keen to be seen as doing ‘good works’ for the underprivileged. To be seen to be taking diversity seriously is a part of this trend.

All in all, the notion of diversity has been made more palatable by neutering it. In fact much of the diversity literature makes it a point of pride to claim that unlike its predecessors, the diversity agenda is apolitical. Politics just gets in the way of celebration. To my mind, this sort of version of diversity is a perversion of the emancipatory ideal.

These are serious charges which I will substantiate by referring to the literature. There are tens of thousands of works on diversity. My investigative strategy is one of depth rather than breadth; I have chosen to limit my trawl of the literature to just a few of the works that are ‘standards’ or popular, but to go deeply into them, my reasoning is that their popularity must mean that the values and beliefs contained in these works must resonate with those that are generally held in organisational life. The works are primarily from the USA and the Great Britain. Three are by diversity consultants (Loden 1996; Henry, 2003; Thiederman, 2003), two are edited collections of papers, one from academia and one from the business environment (Stocksdale and Crosby, 2004 and The Harvard Business Review on Managing Diversity, 2001), and there are two handbooks of practice (Thompson, 2001; Clements and Spinks 2006).

3.1 *Diversity peddlers*

The literature on diversity is curiously non-diverse, tending to follow the same routine. First, they list four rationales for why organisations should embrace diversity change programmes, these being: it is a legal requirement, litigation by the disenfranchised, attracting and retaining ‘diverse talent’ and creating new ethnic market niches. Then ironically, they almost all bemoan the fact that despite years of change programmes, there has been little real shift in the demographics of the kinds of people in positions of power. The diversity consultants then go onto claim that their diversity programme *does really work*, e.g. “despite three decades of affirmative action, glass ceilings were still firmly in

place for women and people of color above middle management levels... Yet, sadly, few organizations have applied proven change adoption principles to diversity implementation” (Loden, 1996, p.23–37). They each propose their own taxonomy of the different ‘types’ of organisations, and go onto delineate a number of stages that organisations will be led through before getting to equality heaven. For example, Thomas, Mack and Montagliani (2004) claim that their ‘full integration theory’ will lead organisations through a three stage process. They are confident enough to assert that the ‘model proposes that each organization will follow the same path to integration’ (p.68).

One of the things we are witnessing here is consultants wanting to differentiate themselves from others in the market place providing a similar service. For example, Thiederman (2003) insists that the culprit is ‘bias’ rather than prejudice; she has trademarked the term ‘Guerrilla Bias’ to prevent others making use of it. Trademarking is a curious move for someone whose espoused ethos is one of openness and inclusivity.

The rhetoric in these works is one of inclusivity, compensating for past wrongs, compassion, non-judgemental acceptance of otherness and so on. However, just behind the rhetoric, we find the ethics of the spreadsheet. In much of the literature, the main rationale proposed for organisations going through some diversity change process is that of enhancing opportunities to make money, and even more money. Thiederman (2003) speaks of ‘lucrative virtue’ and Haq (2004) of the ‘diversity dividend’. Ultimately, the diversity movement (in its present form) is an appeal to the self-interest of the already privileged.

3.2 Henry: new taxonomies of human kind generated by the bottom-line

The tone of the works written by consultants tends to be ‘inspirational’.

Few countries are as diverse as America. Throughout our history, peoples from different lands and regions of the world have headed for our shores. They brought with them their cultures, traditions, languages and religions. As we have grappled with the challenges that a multicultural society presents, it has sometimes felt as if the rest of the world has been an observer, taking side bets as to how our grand experiments in social justice, fairness and equal opportunity would turn out (Henry, 2003, p.2).

For several centuries, individuals of European (e.g. Anglo-Saxon) ancestry have made up the overwhelming majority of individuals in the US workforce (Stone and Stone-Romero, 2004, p.78).

In this alternative universe inhabited by some diversity experts, the minor details of slavery, land grab and genocide are happily absent. Henry says, it ‘is no longer good enough to tolerate differences; we must look for differences’ (Henry, 2003, p.5). And one ought to do this because ‘difference’ is a commodity: ‘[it] is pure pragmatism to treat diversity as an asset’ (Henry, 2003, p.4).

Humanity is now divided into a new taxonomy of just two: those that are multicultural or diverse, and those not: ‘Multicultural groups comprise over 30% of the US population’ (Henry, 2003, p.6). It also happens that these diverse, multicultural people are mostly extremely poor. Nevertheless, she tells us that there is “a market opportunity serving the ‘bottom of the economic pyramid’ namely the four billion people with incomes less than \$1500 a year”.

It follows then that it really is worth the effort of making a little bit of money from each of them, because (thankfully) there are so many of them. She tells us: “In the U.S.,

Latinos, African-Americans and Asian-Americans control more than \$1.3 trillion dollars in purchasing power. Older Americans, people with disabilities and gays and lesbians control another \$1.6 trillion” (Henry, 2003, p.6). And looking further a field we are told that globally, “99% of the population growth is occurring in three regions: Africa, Asia and Latin America, all three comprised of diverse peoples” (Henry, 2003, p.6).

It is becoming apparent as to who is being alluded to when the terms multicultural and diverse are being used – the dark people.

3.2.1 *Ethnic marketing*

There are two parts to the task of ‘ethnic marketing’. First, the company needs to find out about them and their ways of life so that we can cater to their needs and desires. Second, the company needs to give itself a makeover in order to look more ethnic friendly.

Happily, both these birds can be killed with the same stone: by employing some of *them*. Not only will *they* be able to tell *us* what kinds of things *their* people like, but also their presence will make *us* look good in the eyes of the world (recall the points about reputation made earlier).

A well thought out marketing plan targeting the ethnic market begins with “...the company having diversity represented in its ranks that will better relate, better understand, better serve these customers” (Henry, 2003, p.58).

Lest we get too dewy eyed, it is as well to remember that ‘serve’ in this context is doublespeak for ‘sell to’ and ‘make a profit from’.

Several corporations conclude that because lesbians and gay men have been neglected for so long, even modest attempts at marketing to the community in a positive light could generate sales and secure brand loyalty (Lubensky et al., 2004, p.213).

Thus, employing ethnics is a means to reaching the ethnics out there. Their presence is instrumentalised, a means to the end of increased profit. This sort of view is very close to that of Taylor (1911), who also believed that he was doing the workers a favour by treating them as instruments of production, because increasing efficiency meant more pay, and that was what they desired. Anyhow, the ethnics are needed because “Executives, especially those who are not diverse, continue to be relatively unaware of the potential purchasing power of ethnic markets” (Henry, 2003, p.42).

3.2.2 *Recruitment and retention*

The next issue concerns the processes of recruitment and retention of ‘multicultural candidates’. Not only does it take more effort and cost more money than usual to recruit those at the margins, but it also turns out that even when one makes the effort to reach out to them, they are slow in coming forward as they are quite a demanding lot. Not only do they “look for companies that are already diverse, ...[they] are sensitive to the makeup of the interviewing team”, they also “look for a company where there is zero tolerance for anything less than absolute trust, unconditional acceptance and respect” (Henry, 2003, pp.83–84). Absolute trust, unconditional acceptance and respect: if true, these are quite incredible demands. Let us get this clear: here is a consultant telling companies that they should deliver something to the ‘ethnics’ which no other kind of employee would or could be offered, because absolutes and unconditionalities are existential impossibilities.

An idiocy is portrayed as a 'right'. If this is true, then no wonder 'they' find it difficult to get jobs; if only they were more realistic in their demands.

The other reason often put up for trying to include 'those with diversity' in the work force is that there are some amongst them that have 'diverse talent' as Henry calls it. The next problem is that having recruited 'those with diversity', companies have difficulties retaining them. This costs money. 'Conservative estimates of replacing one experienced engineer range between \$50,000 and \$100,000 ...[but if] that engineer is diverse, it will likely be more' (Henry, 2003, p.90). The issue of retention requires serious consideration.

However, the solution suggested by Henry is a strange one. She says that in order to retain these 'diverse employees', the company needs to 'develop a reverence for work experiences, habits and processes of diverse employees' (Henry, 2003, p.7). To revere something, is not to question it or engage with it, but to stand back in awe, and worship it. This then leads to her 'platinum rule': 'Treat others as they want to be treated' (Henry, 2003, p.171).

This injunction to worship at the alter of difference, requires the sacrifice of the possibility of thought itself. What an extraordinary idea, that we should treat others as they want to be treated. To follow this maxim, one would have to abdicate completely one's own sensibilities and ethics: what if 'they' want me to be in a way that I abhor? The proposition beggars belief. But now having asked us to revere difference, she also tells us that differences are irrelevant:

"In a truly inclusive environment, no one really cares how old you are, where you grew up, what academic degrees you've earned, where you've worked or what style clothes you wear. What counts is the quality of your thinking [and]...competence" (Henry, 2003, p.110).

It is no wonder that so many diversity initiatives come to naught. On the one hand, we are being invited to deify the differences between us and others, and on the other hand we are told that these differences do not matter at all, what matters are one's talents and capacities. No thought is given to how the 'we' might be actively excluding and making life difficult for certain kinds of others. Instead, the problem and solution are couched in terms of appreciation.

3.3 Thiederman: 'natural' attractions and repulsions

Several ideas get repeated as 'obvious' truths in the diversity literature. One of these is the idea that: 'It is part of our human nature to gravitate toward and have more positive regard for someone who looks like us' (Henry, 2003, p.171). It follows that it is also natural to have feelings antipathy towards others who do not look like us. We can see then that although these diversity promulgators proclaim themselves inclusivists, they are actually in complete agreement with the racists: they both agree that it is natural to have hostile feelings towards those different from us. Their difference from the racists lies in saying that one should rise above one's nature rather than give into it.

This is also Sondra Thiederman's view as illustrated by a vignette that she provides. Before attending to the vignette itself, I will contextualise it by giving an outline of her diversity programme as described in her book *Making Diversity Work*. This will also serve the purpose of giving us a glimpse of what some of the diversity change programmes look like.

She would like to help rid companies of ‘bias’. According to her, biases are virus like. She says: ‘what bias does is interfere with our ability to see people accurately, hence the need to renew our vision’ (Thiederman, 2003, p.7). She has discovered a particularly nasty variety of this virus, ‘guerrilla bias’TM. She offers organisations the service of virus removal through her vision renewal programme (VRP) which “begins with strategies for becoming aware of our biases and moves systematically toward learning to shove our biases aside, and, finally, immunise ourselves from the relapse that so often accompanies personal growth” (Thiederman, 2003, p.7). She says that

“what the VRP does is freeze-dry each target bias by taking the emotional juice out of it, thus reducing it to an inert lump that can be grabbed and tossed out of your thinking and out of your life” (Thiederman, 2003, p.46).

Bias is ‘an acquired habit of thought rooted in fear and fuelled by conditioning, and as such, can be unacquired and deconditioned’ (Thiederman, 2003, p.7).

Keep this in mind, as describes a situation at a conference in which she could not decide where to sit.

“At one table, everyone was white ... at the other ... black ... my impulse as a white person was to go to the white table; a little more familiarity, a little more comfort. In the end, I gave into that impulse and took a seat at the table with the folks who looked most like me” (Thiederman, 2003, p.21).

In her analysis of the situation, she says that this was not an instance of bias on her part, because:

“We assume that the clustering of kinship groups is a sure sign that something is wrong. Do these groups feel uncomfortable with each other? It is time we bring balance to this issue of being drawn to people like ourselves. We must learn when it is bias and when it is simple human comfort. It is this desire for comfort and the wish to be with people with whom we identify that draws us to members of our own kinship group” (Thiederman, 2003, p.22).

There are several points to be noticed here: first, she feels a kinship because of skin colour. Second, she says that she sat with the white group because ‘it is simple human comfort’; therefore, she was uncomfortable with the black group. If this is not bias, then it is certainly racism. By describing her response as one of ‘simple human comfort’ she need not inquire into the sources of her discomfort because it is ‘natural’. This is exactly the rationalisation that was used to justify apartheid, bolstered by the support given it by a number of sociobiologists (Lewontin, 1993; Van den Berghe, 1988).

She is right in saying that our desire for solidarity is ‘natural’, but wrong because the question that she has avoided asking herself is: why is it that she felt a kinship, a solidarity no less, through skin colour? The table could be full of some mix of paedophiles, white supremacists, capitalists, communists and so on; some of these groups she (presumably) would find no solidarity with.

Amongst the many erroneous claims made regarding the human condition, is the following: Those with a “strong sense of kinship identity tend to be the very people who are most receptive to the ideas and input of other groups” (Thiederman, 2003, p.22). But in this she and others (e.g. Ponterotti and Pedersen, 1993; Branden, 1994) are severely mistaken. Fundamentalists of all descriptions have very strong kinship identities, yet they cannot countenance the legitimacy of alternative views.

4 Close encounters with diversity of the second kind

Much of the literature portrays itself as scientific and as dealing in hard facts. One of the ways this illusion is achieved is by continually referring to research. Many claims get transmuted into taken-for-granted truths by dint of uncritical repetition in paper after paper. One of these unquestioned 'truths' is that *there are* two different 'kinds' of diversity, surface/secondary – to do with visible markers, and deep/primary – to do with thoughts and attitudes (Harrison, Price and Bell 1998). So, Haq tells us, that Loden and Rosener (1991) tell us, that diversity is categorised into six primary dimensions and several secondary dimensions. The primary dimensions are those that human beings cannot change: gender, age, ethnicity, physical abilities, race and sexual orientation. The secondary dimensions are those which can be changed, such as education, geographic location, social status, income, marital status, parental status, religious beliefs, work experience and so on (Haq, 2004, p.278).

We never find out what the ontological status of these claims are, nor anything regarding their epistemological basis, nor what the distinctions add to the understanding of organisational life. Notice the pattern: repetition, appreciation, no disputation. Thus, Haq appears blind to the bizarre nature of the claims that she repeats. Surely, the so-called primary categories are not immutable and do change: age changes continually, ethnicity (as something self and other ascribed) mutates from context to context, physical abilities can be honed, people's sexual orientation have been known to change over a lifetime and so on. The list of changeables can also be deconstructed similarly. Here, ideological list making is masquerading as research and fact finding.

To talk of differences being surface/deep or fixed/mutable completely misses the point. The 'lists' of difference are extraordinarily impoverished. The number of differences between any two human beings is uncountable as are the number of similarities between them. The real question is: how is it that out of this range of infinite logical possibilities, one or other similarity or difference comes to be so dominant that all others appear to be of no consequence?

The course advocated by the diversity experts is for organisations not to get too caught up with surface diversity (colour, gender, etc.) as this leads to strife, and instead one ought to focus on the deeper variety of diversity – the differing ways people feel and think. However, organizations ought to "...use surface-level diversity as an opportunity to learn about and form deeper-level diversity, [as this leads to]...many financial and productivity benefits" (Thomas, Mack and Montagiani, 2004, p.37).

The problem though is that 'ethnics', women and others find themselves marginalised because of surface diversity (to use their term). They seem to be suggesting that one should not look too closely at what the problem actually is, because that aggravates people; instead, look elsewhere (into the deep) and all will be well.

5 The bureaucratisation of identity

The quantitative methodologies of the hard sciences rely on things that are countable and measurable. The diversity promoters create the illusion that they too are hard scientists by reifying aspects of the messy complexities of human life. Reification turns processes into things (and therefore countable), for example skills, competencies, tools, psychological traits, typologies, and most important for our purposes – identity itself. In order to unpack the issues, I need to go through several steps of argument.

First, I would agree that the collection of statistical evidence is necessary and important for many reasons. It is a way of generalising. It is not possible to make any generalised claims when we look at a particular situation in which Jim rather than Jane was promoted. But when data is collected on very large numbers of persons, then we are obliged to explain how it is that (say) 90% of CEOs are male and 95% are white and so on.

This data correlates types of people with positions of power and authority. But what is it we are talking about when we speak of ‘types’ of people? In the UK, people are asked to self-ascribe their ‘ethnicity’ by checking one of the 16+ tick boxes that have been generated by the legislature (Commission for Racial Equality, 2007). The content of the form is as follows:

What is your ethnic group? Choose one section from A to E, then tick the appropriate box to indicate your ethnic group.

A: White:

- British
- Irish
- Any other white background (please write in) _____

B: Mixed:

- White and black Caribbean
- White and black African
- White and Asian
- Any other mixed background (please write in) _____

C: Asian or Asian British:

- Indian
- Pakistani
- Bangladeshi
- Any other Asian background (please write in) _____

D: Black or black British:

- Caribbean
- African
- Any other black background (please write in) _____

E: Chinese or other ethnic group:

- Chinese
- Any other (please write in) _____

Not stated:

There are a great many important issues here: first, given that the requirement to collect this data has been written into the legislature in a *Race Relations Act*, it is curious that the data that is being collected is that of ethnicity and not race, and even more curious, notice

the critical role 'colour' is given in the categorisation process. Second, there is the fact that the manifold complexities of human belongings are reduced to just 16 categories; the advantage for the bureaucrats is that through the device of counting tick boxes, identity is rendered countable. More problematic is that in countenancing a notion of 'mixed' as one of the categories of ethnicity, the legislature gives succour to the racists as it implies that there exist ethnicities that are 'unmixed' or pure. We have to ask: just what is it we think is being 'mixed' and in what manner does the mixing take place? The fourth issue concerns methodology. The fact that the categorisation is self-ascribed means that it is subjective, and yet because there are numbers of tick boxes to be counted, means that the data now takes on the appearance of objectivity. This is a methodological sleight of hand which transmutes subjective impressions into objective evidence.

Fifth, it seems to me that self-ascription, although it has its own validity, actually misses the point. Racism, prejudice and the like are driven not so much what I think of myself, but by what you take me to be – particularly if you are more powerful than me. It is the other-ascription of the more powerful ones that is critical here. It matters little if a person thinks of themselves primarily as a middle class or British if they are perceived first and foremost by more powerful others as black, and this is the point, treated on that basis. It seems to me that one of the tacit reasons as to why self-ascription is given weight over other-ascription is to be found in the original premises of liberalism. Recall the liberal premise that people have rights over the things that they own, and others are obliged to respect this uncritically. In this way of thinking, as people 'own' their feelings about their ethnic identities, then their claims on the matter are true and final.

And finally, we should notice that this way of proceeding has critical consequences for how people come to view themselves. It becomes imperative to be known and be recognised by the legislature by a particular name – a category, as a kind of people. This is because once a category comes to be recognised as such, then not only does it gain a legitimacy in public discourse, but now, as an entity, it also is deemed to have certain 'rights' in relation to other similar entities.

6 The portrait of the other

The diversity discourses bolster the illusion that their understanding of human relations is scientific through the use of statistics to generate cultural types each with their (alleged) types of psychology. Much of what passes for psychology in *The Psychology and Management of Workplace Diversity* consists of statements like: 'Research shows that members of group A are more likely to think/believe/feel X about members of group B', or 'X % of group A do such and such and y% do the other'. To my mind, this is not psychology but arithmetic, and an arithmetic that is problematic as there are serious questions to be raised about how real are the things that they think that they are counting or measuring.

The problems arising from this way of proceeding are best explicated by a detailed read of a paper by two professors, Stone and Stone-Romero (2004). Their paper sets out to describe the traits of a number of cultures: Anglo-American/European, Hispanic-American, African-American, Asian-American and Native-American. But soon this set of five rapidly condenses down to two: the Anglo-American and the rest. And the rest, although American, their strange ways are those from other places and times.

They begin by drawing on Hofstede's (1980, 1991) notion of *power-distance* to say that in Anglo-American culture,

there is a limited dependence of subordinates on supervisors, and there is a preference for consultation or participation in decision-making. "[meanwhile] In Hispanic-Americans there is often a great deal of dependence of subordinates on supervisors (Stone and Stone-Romero 2004, p.85).

Anglo-Americans are able to think for themselves and so are less reliant on their supervisors, whilst the Hispanics are reliant on their leaders to tell them what to do, presumably because they are not so able to think for themselves.

Cultures are said to have differing attitudes to status. In *achievement orientated* cultures, people gain status on the basis of their actual achievements. Meanwhile, people in *ascriptive cultures* have status ascribed (given) to them on the basis of some mix of their 'gender, family connections, and inherited wealth, [age, etc.]' (Stone and Stone-Romero 2004, p.85).

There is but one achievement orientated culture, and it is the Anglo-American. They say,

'research shows that members of other US subcultures (e.g. African Americans, Hispanic Americans, Asian Americans, Native Americans) are much less likely than Anglo-Americans to base their identities on achievement. ... many African Americans base their identities on such factors as style, expression, spontaneity, and spirituality (Kochman 1974, 1981)'

(Stone and Stone-Romero 2004, p.85).

Having just said that achievements play no role in the construction of Native American's identity and status, they immediately contradict themselves and tell us that: "Native Americans often base their identities on the extent to which they have worked in the interest of other tribal members" (Stone and Stone-Romero 2004, p.85).

This is a recapitulation of the myth that it is only 'the west' that operates on meritocratic principles and the rest of the world operates on principles of greed, ignorance and nepotism. Stone and Stone-Romero seem to be unaware that the meritocratic principle took root in China some two-thousand years before the founding fathers gave voice to the American Constitution. In ancient China, candidates were obliged to pass an imperial examination in order to prove their capacities before they could become a government officer (Twitchett, 1974). I am not by the way, wanting to suggest that therefore, the Chinese are in some way immune to greed, ignorance and nepotism.

Cultures are also said to differ according to whether they have a 'Universalistic' orientation or 'Particularistic':

"Cultures that subscribe to a universalistic orientation (e.g. European Americans) tend to follow a set [of]...rules that are uniformly applied to all people....they value literal adherence to contracts, and favour rational decision-making. In contrast, cultures that subscribe to a particularistic orientation (e.g. Hispanic, African Americans, Asian Americans) place emphasis on relationships, and are willing to 'bend the rules' to accommodate particular circumstances and individual needs" (Stone and Stone-Romero 2004, p.86).

European Americans (i.e. whites) treat *all others* equally, they stick to their word, and make rational decisions. In contrast, those of *all* other cultures are not only nepotistic, they bend the rules as and when it suits them. Well, let us call a spade a spade – they cheat.

The two cultures also have different attitudes to time.

Some cultures (e.g. Anglo-Americans) view time as linear and place a great deal of emphasis on efficiency and punctuality...“However, other US subcultures (e.g. Hispanic Americans, African Americans, Native Americans) have relatively flexible views about time, and use fairly large intervals in judging lateness” (Stone and Stone-Romero 2004, p.86).

They also tell us that “Research shows that Anglo-Americans often place a great deal of emphasis on planning for the future and being able to delay gratification”. Perhaps the reader, like me, is bemused as to which alternative universe Stone and Stone Romero’s Anglo-American is residing in. Is the withdrawal of the USA from the Kyoto agreement an example of delaying gratification? But having said this, just a few sentences later they blithely say its opposite: “Anglo-Americans...expect to produce short-term payoffs quickly. As a result, researchers have argued that Anglo-Americans have a short-term, ‘bottom-line’ perspective” (Stone and Stone-Romero 2004, p.87).

The final differentiator of cultures is that of *communication styles*, which gets broken down into four sub elements: the *goal, directness, emotionality and believability*. Beginning with *goals*, they assert that for non-Anglo cultures,

“maintaining harmony and saving face are important goals of *communication*. In contrast, members of individualistic cultures (e.g. Anglo-Americans) are more concerned with communicating the truth [sic] and with basing their arguments on facts and rational arguments” (Stone and Stone-Romero 2004, p.88).

As for *directness*, we are told that people in collective cultures,

“beat around the bush’ rather than getting directly to the point...people in individualistic cultures (e.g. Anglo-Americans)...are direct in their communication... [Further], members of collective cultures often consider individuals from individualistic cultures to be rude...because of their direct communication and disregard of social courtesy (e.g. saying ‘good morning’)” (Stone and Stone-Romero 2004, p.88).

As for *emotionality*, they say that “People from individualistic cultures (e.g. Anglo-Americans) often emphasize calm, unemotional forms of communication, even when there are disagreements about issues” (Stone and Stone-Romero 2004, p.89). And finally in regards to *believability*, the non-Anglos give credibility to those who have high status in their cultures – elders and family members. Meanwhile, “[m]embers of individualistic cultures value achievement and accomplishment...they are more likely to impute creditability to sources that are expert, intelligent, and have a record of high achievement” (Stone and Stone-Romero 2004, p.89).

I have to say, I would not want a person such as the non-Anglo is described to be, to come into my employ. To employ a person who cannot be trusted, who cheats when it suits them, is inevitably late, cannot be relied on, is nepotistic and cannot think for themselves, would be a disaster for any organisation. What we are seeing here in Stone and Stone-Romero’s vision of things is the modern version of 19th century scientific racism.

Consider, if it is indeed the case that the ‘the Anglo’ is as described: naturally fair, task focussed and treated all people on the basis of their merits, then there would be no need for the equal opportunities or diversity movements. If they were indeed so good and true then there would be no need for legislation forcing them to change their attitudes and behaviours.

It is terrifying to me to find this kind of racism masquerading as cross cultural scientific research in a book that is supposed to contain serious academic studies. But more terrifying than the presence of this article, is the fact that in this volume there is not a single voice raised in argument against it, presumably because to disagree or take an antagonistic stance is anathema.

7 Diversity management as an exercise in etiquette

When the diversity experts are not telling organisations how to make more money out of the marginalised, they are giving them lessons in sensitivity and etiquette. Many trainings in diversity are a training in how not to cause offence to others. For example, Clements and Spinks say in their volume *The Equal Opportunities Handbook* ‘by the time you have considered the issues in this book you will have developed greater sensitivity to what might be offensive’ (Clements and Spinks 2006, p.27). Their aim is to enable the reader ‘behave towards everyone...with fairness, courtesy, and sensitivity’ (Clements and Spinks 2006, p.2). They inform the reader that they need not learn about the contents of specific cultures, because they will be taught a set of six ‘skills’ which they will be able to ‘transfer’ into each new situation. These ‘skills’ are those of empathy, understanding, raised awareness, sensitivity, thinking about the consequences and a desire to be fair. But in what sense can these be considered to be ‘skills’? The ‘desire to be fair’ is not a skill, but a moral attitude. In my view, the diversity experts are obliged to use this kind of language in order to give the impression that they have a ‘real’ product to deliver, a thing, an outcome that can be transferred and ‘owned’.

I am not against fairness or courtesy. However, they completely miss the point in regards to processes of exclusion and marginalisation. The question we have to ask is how is it that most *kinds* of people get stripped out of the hierarchy the further ‘up’ one goes, so that eventually at the highest levels, there remains primarily just one kind of person and one kind of colour?

Let us accept Clements and Spinks thesis, that the privileged are prejudiced in regards to some of their employees, and that this prejudice is due to ignorance. The author’s invitation is for people to turn inwards: “we would encourage you, if you feel up to it, to examine your beliefs, attitudes and values regarding others who are different from you... [to] dig underneath layers of defence and justification built up over the years” (Clements and Spinks 2006, pp.14–15). Let us now suppose that a greater sensitivity to others is achieved. The authors belief is that now, the more powerful will be less prejudiced and will be able to recognise the virtues of others.

Thus, they will be more likely to promote others. This is of course a possibility. However, the evidence is against it: despite the ‘personal growth’ model having been used in organisations for some decades, there has been little real change – as all the diversity experts agree. It seems to me that whilst the more powerful are now more sensitive and courteous to their employees, the status quo remains the same. For example, the organisation might put aside a room for the purposes of prayer by devout Muslims in

their employ. In such a case, courtesy and sensitivity would have been used in the service of assuaging the resentments of the marginalised, in order to preserve and perpetuate the traditional structure of power relations.

The tacit expectation is that the leaders in the brave new world will continue to be male and white, but with one difference: the multiculturally 'competent' leader will manage to command and control his charges with the 'skills' of empathy, courtesy and dignity, and so get more cooperation out of them.

7.1 The political

The diversity agenda 'celebrates' two kinds of uniqueness that stand in contradiction to each other. First, it valorises the individual; here every individual is diverse and so it is their unique individuality that ought to be respected (Enlightenment values). Second, it valorises lumpen differences – at the level of cultural, racial or ethnic groups, and now it is each lumpen identity claim that ought to be respected (Romantic values). In both cases, the 'celebration' is apolitical.

The problem is compounded by the fact that there are three misapprehensions regarding how 'difference' is understood. First, it is supposed that sometime in the past, the workforce in the west was homogenous, and that it is only recently that people of difference have arrived and complicated matters. For example, in an otherwise excellent paper, Roosevelt Thomas asks: "how are companies to get from a diverse workforce 'the same commitment, quality, and profit they once got from a homogenous work force'" (Thomas, 2001, p.2). The workforce was never homogenous – it was always constituted by differentials and disputes.

The second issue is the myth of consensus. The fact that black people might be the recipients of prejudice does not make those so coloured a community. To speak of black people in this way is to assume that they all have the same beliefs and ways of living because of their colour. This kind of attempt to counter racism fails, precisely because it continues to use, and therefore reinforce, racialised thinking. Some black people are bankers, others bakers and others crack addicts. In no sense can one claim that black people are a community by virtue of being black. In this way of thinking, even whilst valorising the lumpen differences between designated groupings, the differences within the groupings are rendered invisible. It follows that there can be no spokesperson for the black community. There are only spokespersons for the interests of particular interest groups – and so they will hold conflictual positions. Similarly, we cannot simply celebrate the differences of the Muslims from the 'us' because 'they' are not a consensual category, and neither are 'we'. As soon as one takes account of the differences within the designated us and them, then we are in the territory of politics and power relations – which the diversity movement deliberately and assiduously avoids engaging in as it thinks that it just muddies the water. Politics does indeed muddy the water, but that is precisely its virtue – it challenges the simplistic clarity of the diversity promulgators.

The third issue pertains to the assumption that persons belong to just one category. This is never the case; people inhabit multiple cultures simultaneously, the conventions of one often being in conflict with those of another. Thus, individuals are no more a consensual unity than cultures are. Individuals too are constituted by conflictual diversity.

8 Difficulties and differences

In my view, many diversity initiatives fail, in part because they begin their analysis too late in the process. They mistakenly take the picture that they find themselves initially faced with as ‘the beginning’. The picture is one of difficulties and differences, and the presumption is that the difficulties between groups of people are due to the differences between them. The difficulties are thought to arise because of not recognising or understanding the nature of the differences. The solution is singularly rationalist: learning about the differences will reduce the difficulties arising out of misunderstandings between the different groupings.

But consider: the women of one society are not of a different culture to the men of that same society; these men and women are not strangers to each other, rather they share lives of intimacy. And yet women find themselves marginalised. To give this exclusion a new name and call it sexism, in some ways only serves to further obfuscate the situation. Let me explain. The critical questions, not asked by the diversity agenda are how is it that a differentiation has come about in the first place? And why?

My thesis, and here I follow Norbert Elias (Elias, 1978, 1994; Elias and Scotson, 1994; Dalal 1998), is that the different kinds of people are not found, but made, and they are made different in order to treat them differently. Any person can be construed as ‘the same’ as any and every other on any number of counts, and in the same moment be construed as ‘different’ by a any number of other categories. The question then becomes why is it that Jean is being experienced and named as different to John when she could validly be experienced as the same (or vice versa)?

What is taking place is something one might call an *Othering process* wherein a mere ‘another’ becomes transformed into ‘The Other’. This is how the ‘types’ of humans comes to be generated. The reason that some are *Othered* is precisely in order to treat them differently and give some rationalisation as to why this is just – for example to pay them lower salaries, as is still the case with women in relation to men. It seems to me that there are grounds for arguing that it is not the case that the Other is marginalised because of being mysterious and not understood, rather the Other is known and only too well understood; further, it is this very understanding that is the means of their marginalisation.

8.1 *The political and the psychological*

Confronted with the conflict of values between the drive to increase profits vs. the push for a more diverse workforce, the solution proposed is to say that there is no conflict but confluence: greater diversity will enhance the possibility of greater profits. The claim is that this is a win–win situation. But note, even if this claim were true, the motive for increasing diversity is not in order to ‘do good’ but to ‘do well’ (Draebek, 2008).

The claim however, cannot be sustained because two features of the diversity agenda, which render it ineffectual: its rationalist and cognitivist accounting of the problem (and the solutions that follows from it), and the fact that it is apolitical.

Human beings are not the shallow one dimensional cognitive machines, enacting ‘roles’ and speaking ‘scripts’ that some diversity promulgators take them to be (Stone and Stone-Romero, 2004). These sections of the movement appear to be either completely unaware of unconscious processes, or when they do acknowledge their existence, then they are mostly understood from within a simplistic rationalist and

cognitivist framework: the ‘bad stuff’ is said to be due to a cognitive error, a misapprehension that can be ‘fixed’ through the provision of facts. It is as though the Freudian revolution had never taken place, which for all its faults nevertheless gave us the incontrovertible insight which at its simplest says, that there is more going on in the human mind than can ever meet the eye.

Not only are human beings conflicted entities, desiring many mutually contradictory things for all kinds of reasons (rational, emotional and many others), but it is also the case that many of the desires and much of the conflict is unconscious and so is just not available to be directly ‘spoken to’ and corrected by the rationalists. Thus, the attempt to ‘teach’ and ‘train’ one’s way out of the problem by developing tools, competencies and skills completely misses the point. In part, this is so because the ‘solution’ is still firmly within the command and control paradigm, and the mind cannot be controlled by command.

Humans do indeed have the capacity to think rationally and have the freedom to make their individual judgments and take actions on that basis. However, our capacities to be free and make autonomous rational decisions are severely constrained on two counts. First, by the fact that there are many elements of the decision-making process that we are unconscious of, elements that ‘drive’ the decision in this direction rather than that. In this sense, humans are not so much rational creatures as rationalising ones. And second, by the fact that we are fundamentally social beings in that as we grow from infancy into adulthood, we imbibe particular world views that not only enable us, but also constrain us to experience people and events in certain ways (Dalal, 2002). All of this is to say that our psychology (who we are, how and what we think and feel) is constituted at the deepest of levels by the politics and political histories we are born into. Psyches, as much as people, are intrinsically politicised entities. One can no more take the politics out of the person than one can take the person out of politics.

One of the ways that these enabling constraints confound our rationality is as follows.

I begin with the Eliasian thesis that power relations are intrinsic to human relations, and so human groupings are not artefacts of nature, but generated by these self-same power relations. It is the more powerful that have more possibility of determining how things ought to be and how they are.

Now, Elias tells us that we have an automatic tendency to read and experience power superiority as an indicator of human superiority and vice versa. We tend to attribute more virtues and capabilities to those who belong to groupings with higher status than to those with lower status. Despite our rational selves, we readily tend to look up to doctors and look down on cleaners. This is our conscious experience, and we believe that what we are experiencing is a plain-as-day-incontrovertible-fact. The phenomenon is well-known to social psychologists who have (unsurprisingly) named it the attribution error (Duncan 1976; Brown, 1995).

Experiments have shown that perceptions of the same event will be skewed depending on where the protagonists are located in the power relational field. In one situation, black protagonists were thought to be innately aggressive, and white protagonists were thought to be rationally responding to an external provocation. Taylor and Jaggi (1974) found something similar in relation to Hindus and Muslims (higher and lower status respectively) in the Indian context. The thing is this: both the more powerful and the less powerful are prone to reading human events in this skewed way. And this kind of difficulty cannot simply be fixed by the provision of facts or ‘training’.

In sum, the issues of marginalisation and exclusion are not only much deeper (i.e. having to do with the deep structures of the mind), but also much broader (i.e. having to do with power relations and the political) than that rendered by these accounts from the diversity discourses. Further, the two are inextricably embedded in each other. Thus, the work for real change has to be as broad and deep as that. Diversity change programmes have to look power relations squarely in the eye rather than ‘celebrate’ difference. In fact I would say that the celebration of difference becomes very much a part of the problem, even as it tries to be the solution.

But having said that, I do not think that there are any easy programmes one can devise to get to equality heaven. We must continually struggle to find solutions, but each solution will necessarily throw up new problems of their own. For example, to counter the issues caused by the processes of attribution errors, equal opportunity interview protocols were devised. These sought to solve the problem by effectively trying to remove human interactions from the interview process by using a system of scoring answers. It does this in order to try to focus objectively on competencies, and to exclude one’s subjective responses to the person from the judgement. But this solution does not really work either, because it attempts to dispense entirely with the humanity of the interviewers as well as the applicants. But it is this very mix of humanities that is key to how well a person will perform in an organisation. So the problem that one now has to attend to is, how can one conduct interviews that allow one’s emotional responses to be legitimately a part of the decision-making process? Whatever solution we will come with, it will necessarily throw up new difficulties, which we will have to attend to in turn.

9 Conclusions

In conclusion, I want to make clear that I am not proposing that we should find a way of not seeing differences between people because we are all the same; and if only we learnt to see the world right then all this nasty stuff would disappear. I am not arguing for such a simplification. My position is that we cannot not divide; cognitively, emotionally or in any other way. The places we find ourselves ‘naturally’ dividing are aspects of the ideologies we have imbibed that lead us to experience and see the world in particular ways. And even as we try to address one set of iniquities born of one set of ideologies, we will find ourselves manufacturing others despite ourselves, and all because we cannot not divide.

The main difficulty for me in regards the way diversity is being promoted is not only the failure to recognise conflict as intrinsic to human existence, but also that the nature of this conflict is always political. It is the avoidance of the political that renders the diversity movement anodyne and so readily assimilated into the status quo.

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Notes

¹ This pithy phrase was used by William Wulf, the President of the National Academy of Engineering, quoted in Henry (2003, p.112).

² Note in passing – when the term American is being used here, it is clear that what is being referred to are whites. Other kinds of human beings are referred to as diverse or multicultural in this literature.