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Diversity Management: At the center of HRM and Leadership.

*L*ectio Precursoria for defence of Jonna Louvrier's Ph.D. thesis entitled: "Diversity, difference and diversity management. A contextual and interview study of managers and ethnic minority employees in Finland and France". The thesis was defended at Hanken School of Economics on the 7th of September 2013. Professor Jeff Hearn acted Custos and Professor Albert J. Mills Opponent.

In December 2010 Umayya Abu Hanna, a Palestinian-born woman and Finnish resident since 1981, decided to move away from Finland as a way to protect her child, a 3-years-old South-African born little girl. Umayya was what some people would call a truly successful immigrant, supposing that speaking Finnish and having a high-status job makes one successful. She was a journalist, working in Finnish, an elected member of the City council of Helsinki, and a writer. A good taxpayer to the Finnish state. When explaining her reasons to leave Finland, she said that during her years here she had put up with a lot of racism and nasty comments re-

lated to her own origin, and that she had gotten used to ignore these. But that she just could not put up with the racism her black daughter was encountering on a regular basis. The fact that people of any age group and any social background called her daughter a nigger, and questioned her right to be here, was too much for her. She felt that in such a climate of difference the only options her daughter had were to either give in and accept that she indeed was inferior to the supposedly normal Finns or to constantly fight back. Neither of the options was good enough. By taking her daughter to another country she hoped that her daughter would

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have other ways of making sense of herself and others, and that other discourses around racial difference would exist.

But what do Umayya Abu Hanna and her daughter have to do with working life in Finland and in France? And what does their story have to do with business and business organisations?

Work organisations are not detached from society, and also in workplaces discourses about difference position people in very different ways. Differences can of course be seen as positive resources, a typical example of such a situation is for instance when a person of Asian origin in Finland works for expanding the Asian market and can draw on his or her cultural and linguistic knowledge. A very specific example of differences being seen as valuable was mediatised in May this year when the German software company SAP declared that they want to recruit people with autism as program developers, as people with autism tend to have a great ability to concentrate, to pay attention to detail and to solve complex problems. But often differences are seen as negative and lead to situations of for instance inequality, harassment and racism. So in both Finland and France there are people living similar experiences as Umayya and her daughter, in their everyday work. They are seen as being different, and their difference is seen as a reason for them to be inferior. They too can either accept that they actually are inferior, fight back or leave. And it is the ones with most resources who tend leave, just like Umayya Abu Hanna. In France there even exists an agency, helping ethnic minority professionals to relocate to the UK, where discrimination against ethnic minorities is assumed to be less prevalent than in France.

Umayya Abu Hanna explained her move away from Finland in an article in Helsingin Sanomat, the main Finnish national daily newspaper, in December 2012. The article quickly became the most read article in the electronic version of the newspaper that year. Many had opinions related to her choice and many reacted in the media. Some understood her, supporting the perception that racism truly is a problem in Finland. Others were surprised, or wanted to describe Finland in other terms. For instance, André Noël Chacker, also a successful immigrant, said in the same newspaper a few months later that Umayya had made a mistake; she should not have left Finland. According to him, one should not let racism beat one down. And also, Finns should be understood, he said, as they are not so used with differences – yet at least. But the position Chacker speaks from is very different from Umayya's. He is white and male and coming from a western country. As Linda McGee Calvert and V. Jean Ramsey have shown in their article, 'Speaking as Female and White: a non- dominant/dominant group standpoint', published in Organization in 1996 the way we see discrimination and racism is very much shaped by the position we look at it from. From a dominant position, such as from a white male's, it is easy to ignore racism, and to explain negative situations related to difference as being isolated events and as being interpersonal. It is not a general problem of racism that Umayya Abu Hanna fled from in leaving Finland, a dominant white may say, just some ill-behaving bitter old grandmas, you know, the grandmas who make nasty comments to everyone. So if it wasn't skin colour it would have been something else the grandma would have complained about, the white Finn may say. But from the minority position the situation looks

very different. When small and big negative incidents related to your difference occur repeatedly, it starts to look like a pattern, a systematic rejection of your difference.

So one reaction to Umayya Abu Hanna's decision to leave was to say that she was too weak, she should have had thicker skin, and not take things so seriously. This is what many minorities hear in work life. Persons in dominant positions may say that racist or sexist jokes are just jokes, nothing ill-meant. Or that the terminology chosen to talk about difference, for instance the use of the term "neekeri" which is "nigger" in Finnish, should not be understood as racist. That the intentions are not bad. However, as the Finnish sociologist Anna Rastas wrote in "En ole rasisti mutta...Maahanmuutosta, monikulttuurisuudesta ja kritiikistä" [I am not racist but , about Immigration, multiculturalism and critique…] in 2009, the definition of what is racist has to be based not on the intentions, but on the consequences. And events that were not meant to harm, may indeed have harmful consequences. But how should one know what the consequences are, one may wonder? How should one know how a person belonging to a minority will react to a joke or to the term 'nigger'? And is it not the fault of the non-dominant person, if she or he takes things too seriously, when the intentions were not to harm anyone. No, it is not, says Doiyn Atewologun, researcher in organisational psychology at City University of London specialising in ethnic relations in work. It is the person who is in a privileged position who has the responsibility to avoid creating situations where minority organisational members may or will feel unrespected or unvalued because of their ethnicity.

Let me give an example. A boss, let us imagine that the boss is white and male this time, may have the habit of not greeting colleagues in the morning. This boss does not greet anyone. So when the boss just passes a minority employee in the corridor without saying good morning or hi, the minority employee is confronted with a similar situation as is his or her white dominant colleagues. Only, the frame through which the person belonging to the minority may interpret the events in the workplace may be a racialised one. For him or her, the boss's not greeting can be experienced as being due to prejudice towards ethnic difference. And this, says Doiyn Atewologun, is something persons in dominant positions need to be aware of. The consequences of not greeting a colleague are not the same if the colleague is a white male or a black woman. Power and privilege brings with it greater responsibility.

But not only ethnicity shapes the way we understand work life and interactions with colleagues. We all have many identities, we are the carriers of many differences, and it is the constellation of our many differences that positions us in different ways. Also the meanings of differences change from one context to another: they are not fixed. So it would thus be a mistake to suppose that persons belonging to a minority will experience worklife in a similar way, or that all women share similar expectations about work. This is what in theory is called intersectionality – the view that different identity axes interact and produce interrelated systems of oppression, inequality and injustice. If we think again about Umayya and André, the two successful immigrants to Finland. As immigrants they have very different experiences. In addition to their immigrant background there are many other identity axes, or differences, that influence their position. Most apparent is gender, ethnicity and family status. Umayya is

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Arab, a woman and a mother of a black child. André is white, male and his children are white.

As differences shape our opportunities and perceptions, it could be assumed that differences have been taken into account in management theorising. But for a long time, differences were rather rarely, if at all, considered in management research or practice. Management and leadership theories were supposed to apply universally, to non-differentiated organisational members. From the 1970's onwards the situation has slowly changed. First, especially gender as a dimension of difference was studied and gender equality programmes were designed in organisations. Race and ethnicity were addressed much later, in the 1990's, and intersectional approaches to differences in work, analyses taking multiple dimensions of difference into account are even still today rare.

Today the dominant terminology to address differences in management literature, and in work organisations, is that of diversity management. Diversity management is different from previous approaches to differences in work, where equality was central. There where equality approaches focused on specific differences, such as gender or race, diversity management initiatives may focus on all differences at the same time. And not only on differences in social identities, or only on underprivileged groups, but on any types of differences, such as style or preference – so diversity initiatives may take working style or free time interests into account. However, this does not mean that the intersecting nature of differences would be acknowledged in diversity management initiatives, on the contrary, not even in diversity research literature. As Evangelina Holvino wrote in in Gender, Work and Organization in 2010, there

is an outstanding silence around the intersection of different differences in diversity management research.

But let us go back for a moment, and look at where diversity management came from, what are its origins? The idea of diversity management emerged in the United States in the 1980's. At that time Affirmative Action policies, that is, policies that aimed to ensuring that underrepresented groups achieved employment and advance in work had a twenty years' long history, but the requirements on organisations were being loosened. However, even though the pressure to pay attention to differences in personnel management decreased; the interest towards differences in the composition of the workforce increased. Diversity management got a real spark from a research report published by the Hudson Institute in 1987, called Workforce 2000. According to the report, the composition of the US workforce would in the future change radically. White men would become a minority. So corporate America needed to learn to recruit and manage minorities and women. Even if this in the beginning was seen as a negative situation the situation is quickly turned into an opportunity. Diversity and difference become presented as positive issues, as valuable resources for business organisations. A more diversified workforce it is suggested will be more innovative, more efficient, and it will better understand the clientèle's needs. And by managing diversity companies would avoid costly discrimination lawsuits. There was a real business case for managing diversity. The companies knowing how to manage a diverse workforce would be heading the competition for the best talents.

Now the terminology and practice of managing diversity has spread over the world, and

in many European countries diversity management is a known practice. Diversity charters, which are voluntarily signed documents proving a company's engagement to promote diversity in the workplace, now have been launched in 12 European countries. But the different national contexts for diversity and difference are very different. The legal framework in Finland and France for instance clearly differs from the US. The national histories and the demographics differ between Finland and France. So as in the North American context Pushkala Prasad and Albert Mills in 1997 stated that scholars need to examine what the meanings of diversity are, the same question needs to be addressed in new contexts. This is one of the main objectives of the thesis examined here today. What does diversity, difference and diversity management mean in Finland and France?

Diversity management research is today a field of its own, with many strands. Within the critical stream of diversity management literature researchers have expressed concerns about the ways in which difference is conceptualised. Studies have shown that diversity management work often is based on essentialised understanding of difference. That is, differences are assumed to be innate, fixed and stable. And based on a difference it is assumed that one can predict the behaviour; motivations or capabilities of a person. Essentialised views of women, for instance, can lead to expectations of being caring, or having an eye for details, or not having the natural talent to be a leader. Also, differences are assumed to be discrete categories, persons are either man or woman, either black or white, either able or disabled, and so on. Initiatives of diversity based on these types of assumptions of difference are at a great risk of not capturing the complexity of diversity and social relations. And these types of initiatives may not be providing good bases for creating inclusive organisations. Therefore, researchers have called for diversity initiatives to be based on conceptions of differences as socially constructed and to acknowledge the intersecting of differences.

In my study I looked at how managers talked about differences when they described their diversity management work. And I found that even though essentialised views of differences were very common, not all talk constructed knowledge about differences as essentialised. Some managers indeed talked about differences as being socially constructed. However, working for diversity from this assumption did not make the organisations any more inclusive of differences. When differences were seen as socially constructed the assumption was that by not leaving any space for the treatment of such a difference the difference would cease to exist; it would not be constructed in the sphere of work. So in order to guarantee that the organisation treated persons with different ethnic backgrounds equally, the only thing required was that both management and the minorities themselves act as if there was no ethnic difference.

When managers talked about their diversity management efforts and the challenges of a diverse organisation they also spoke in ways to acknowledge the intersecting of different differences. This too, however, did not lead to any increased inclusion and diversification – on the contrary. An example of this took place when managers in France talked about gender as an important dimension of diversity. As one of the managers explained they needed to recruit more women, and having a more diversified personnel in terms of gender was an advantage

increasing both the efficiency and the capacity to innovate. However, not any type of women would do. While their formal diversity programme spoke about promoting women, in the discussion it became clear that in management practice gender was seen as intersecting with age and family status. Women of a certain age, and women with families, were not perceived as that interesting, and specific careers were designed for them. What the company was looking for was women with the ambition to have a masculine career. To what extent women aiming to fulfil the masculine ideal of work bring with them diversity, new ideas and ways of doing, can be questioned.

Another gap in the diversity literature critical scholars have pointed to is the fact that most diversity studies have looked at the issue from the managers' point of view. Also, as Anna Lorbiecki and Gavin Jack pointed to already in 2000, in their article "Critical Turns in the Evolution of Diversity Management", published in the British Journal of Management, diversity management programmes have been found to make a separation between those who manage and those who are managed. The ones managing are supposedly untouched by diversity, while diversity is to be found within those managed. If and when diversity management indeed is designed and executed by managers – who tend to be in dominant positions, it is crucial, also within research, to give more space and a voice to those managed, the minorities.

This is something I did in my study. My study is among the first, if not the first, to examine diversity management from both managers' and ethnic minorities' perspectives, in organisations that actually do have a formal commitment to manage diversity. And what did my study show related to this? First of all,

the very majority of the ethnic minority employees were not aware of their company's engagement to promote diversity. And the fact that their employer did manage diversity did not seem to help them in any way. Many of them encountered difficult situations because of being different, on a regular basis. Just as Umayya Abu Hanna and her daughter. Employees in Finland were called 'niggers' by clients, some minority employees were not talked to, others were not listened to. And some were harassed over a longer period of time by their superiors and co-workers. The diversity managers in Finland normalised the discrimination their employees encountered as something nonserious, leaving the minorities to manage the situation by themselves. Just as Umayya and her daughter, they too either had to accept that they were inferior, fight back, or leave. Or like André Noël Chacker, they could see discrimination as speaking about Finns' still being too inexperienced to encounter differences.

Is managing diversity then sensible at all, if minority employees do not seem to benefit from the initiatives? And what should the objectives of diversity management be? Enhance equality, or improve business?

Addressing questions of diversity and difference in work are important and timely issues that have to be done in all work organisations. Diversity management is not only a question of equality. Providing all employees with work life realities where differences do not lead to discrimination and racism is a true business question, a central question of Human Resource Management and Leadership. When well planned and implemented, diversity management can contribute to creating inclusive organisations and help both improving equality and business results. It can be a way to produce new

knowledge about differences, and a way to provide other options than accepting being inferior, fighting back, or leaving.

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