

Solidarity through difference: Exploring the linkage between team diversity and micro-practices of (in)equality

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Abstract

This qualitative study explores the intricate linkage between organizing in diverse teams and relational (in)equality. Literature on diversity in teams predominantly applies a positivist approach prescriptive of how to compose the ‘successful’ diverse team while drawing up process gains and losses. Relying on an ethnographic study of diverse teams in a Danish subsidiary of a multinational service company renowned for its diversity profile and organizing work in diverse teams this article gives a nuanced picture of the relational dynamics of diverse teams both hindering and increasing relational (in)equality. It is explored how diversity is linked to paradoxical processes of gendered and ethnified hierarchies based in stereotypical in- and out-groups as well as (organic) solidarity through difference. Drawing on these paradoxical processes, the analysis unfolds how equality in diverse teams might be fostered by team practices that stress members’ heterogeneity and avoid reducing minority members to mere representatives of a (stigmatized) social group. These are furthermore team practices that strengthening team solidarity through openness to difference.

Keywords: Diversity, mechanic and organic solidarity, relational (in)equality, teams

Introduction

Globalization of markets, customers and labor markets have accelerated environmental and internal complexity in organizations in regards to differentiated customer expectation of products and services, competition on international markets, and employing an increasingly multicultural labor force. Seemingly ubiquitous in contemporary organizations, a combination of diversity and teamwork is often theorized as favoring a globalized market and to the benefit of effectiveness, innovation and engagement derived from variance of knowledge and perspectives accruing from diversity (Gagnon and Collinson, 2017; Stahl et al., 2009). ‘Good’ teamwork signifies that organizational members are cooperating using their different skills and abilities to work towards a shared purpose and common

goal. The question of whether diversity has an impact on team's capacity to do so is the subject of much practitioner discussion and scholarly research (Stahl et al., 2009). However, results are equivocal: On the one hand, research on diverse teams has demonstrated a tight link between members' diversity in competences and heritage, and then creativity and innovative advantage (e.g., Doz et al., 2004; Wei and Lau, 2011). On the other hand, team scholars have proven how diversity might involve trade-offs such as reduced communication and coordination due to cultural barriers as both e.g. culture, age, and gender can be sources of stereotyping (Acker 2006; Barker, 1996; Holck, 2017; Holck and Muhr, 2017; Paunova, 2016; Tomaskovic-Devey, 2014).

Drawing on this literature diversity and team dynamics, this article contributes to research linking diverse teams and micro-practices of (in)equality (Crowley, 2014; Tomaskovic-Devey, 2014). Through a qualitative study of cultural and gender diversity in teams in a multinational Danish company Service, the aim is to more openly explore the complex relation between diverse teams and micro-practices of social categorization, status hierarchies, as well as internal solidarity through openness to diversity. Service is a major employer in Denmark with more than 7000 employees across the country out of which 50 pct. are women and 48 pct. have migrant background (internal statistics 2017). Diversity in Service has historically happened due to lack of qualified labor. Consequently, Service has strategically worked to value the different skills, work experiences and abilities that the many diverse employees bring into the work teams inspired by business case rationales of innovation, effectiveness and leaning. Rather contradictory most migrants in Service work in the lowest echelons of the organization in low-skilled and often temporary or part-time positions. Additionally, Service operates in a highly competitive market characterized by low-skilled and low-paid jobs with low entry barriers, tight time frames, focus on cost efficiency and physically straining work hence prone for exploitation and not for the more empowering aspects of team work.

The remainder of this article is organized as follows. First, I briefly review research on and present a conceptual framework on literature on diversity and team work. Then method, research site, and data generating techniques are presented. The analysis falls into two sections unfolding first the different functioning of respectively homogeneous and heterogeneous teams, and second the working of stereotypes and status hierarchies of ethnicity and gender. The article finally discusses how the mutability of inequality might be enhanced in diverse teams by enhancing team solidarity through difference as well as implications for practice.

Theoretical background

Within literature on cultural and gender diversity in teams, the question of whether diversity has an impact on team's effectiveness and innovative capacity has been the subject of much practitioner discussion and scholarly research with equivocal results (Stahl et al. 2009). Research on diversity in teams has largely been guided by two research strands: The social categorization perspective and the "value in diversity" perspective. The 'value in diversity' perspective is primarily optimistic in its outlook. This perspective posits that there is value in diversity, and that diversity in teams will contribute to better performance (Doz et al., 2004). The starting point for this perspective is the perception that teams characterized by diversity are likely to have a broader range of task-relevant knowledge, skills, and abilities, and members with different opinions and perspectives also referred to as the 'diversity dividend' of requisite variety (Homan et al., 2008; Stahl et al., 2009). The diversity dividend is tightly linked to literature associating creativity and innovation to 'different' ethnicities (Florida, 2002; Thoelen and Zanoni, 2016). Diverse teams are moreover believed to curb processes of groupthink (Janis, 1972) leading to faulty decisions because of pressure of unanimity which homogeneous groups potentially fall prey to due to similar backgrounds. The business case for diversity is predicated upon this optimistic perspective; that diversity in teams is thought to broaden team members' perspectives, improve the quality of products and services generated by teams and organizations, and ultimately better meet customers' needs (Ortlieb and Sieben, 2013).

The social categorization perspective proposes that diversity in teams results in negative outcomes. Differences between team members can lead to conflict that reduces team cohesiveness, increase absenteeism and turnover, and ultimately have a detrimental impact on team performance (Paunova, 216). This pessimistic view is based on social identity theory, which posits that perceived similarities and differences between team members form the basis for categorizing ourselves and others into groups (Stahl et al., 2009). Accordingly, people tend to treat members of their own group with favoritism and seek to differentiate themselves from the out-group(s). Studies have uncovered how conflict and power imbalances can be related to some team members being constructed as 'minorities' and hence a lower status amplifying exclusion and divisiveness (Crowley, 2014; Holck, 2017; Konrad, 2003). Categorization and stereotyping has been historically centered around especially gender and race/ethnicity (Acker, 2006; Holck and Muhr, 2017; Tomaskovic-Devey, 2014). The understanding of stereotypes revolves around the notions of femininity and masculinity or minority and majority, which is a way to categorize people (Ashcraft, 2013) and can be related to gender or minority biases (Acker, 2006). Ashcraft (2013) proposed the notion of 'The Glass Slipper' to suggest

how jobs come to appear ‘naturally’ possessed of features that fit certain people (based on democratic features) yet are improbable for others. Stereotypes and categorization of people (e.g. by gender or ethnicity) serves as a part of maintaining inequality in organizations (Acker, 2006; Crowley, 2014). Studies on workplace inequality uncover how “categorical distinctions when wed to organizational divisions of labor, become the interactional basis for moral evaluation, exclusion from opportunities, and exploitation of effort and value.” (Tomaskovic-Devey, 2014:51) These representations undermine claims on “value in diversity, as one’s minority background is constructed as less valuable” (Thoelen and Zanoni, 2016).

Based on this brief literature review, this article want to nuance this picture of what actually goes on in diverse teams? While most of literature referred to above takes a rather black and white perspective predicting causality between diverse teams and micro-practices of (in)equality, this articles tries to nuance this picture. This is done by more openly exploring links between diverse teams and workplace inequality seen as relational, complex and mutable. This is done by asking questions like: How is difference produced and reproduced in team members’ relations in Service? Under which circumstances does construction of difference either lead to stereotypical categorizations or to promotion of members’ differences as valuable? Before addressing these questions directly, the following section outlines the research site and methods for the study.

Method

This study is based on intervention-based ethnographic methods relying on interviews, participant observation and interaction to give voice to organizational members at the frontline level in Service around experiences of team diversity and (in)equality. A reflexive and iterative approach was adopted to data collection and analysis, which allowed the research design to emerge and evolve throughout the analysis (Silverman, 2006). The study has a participatory bent as participants (i.e., managers and employees) and the researcher as a type of participant together construct the data. Consequently, this study is situated in an interpretive frame that acknowledges the constructed and relational nature of fieldwork and research (Gagnon and Collinson, 2017).

Case description

Service is the Danish subsidiary of a worldwide concern that employ more than 500.000 employees in more than 70 countries. Service is an organization that covers all types of tasks in six departments: cleaning, property, catering, support, security and facility management. Service is a highly

specialized and standardized production company with global uniform standards that apply locally in a formalized and centralized. However, alongside the formal hierarchy of line management and top-down decision-making structures, Service is locally organized in teams, which infuse the organization with indirect and more individualized forms of power and control by mutual adjustment (Tomaskovic-Devey, 2014). The team structure also give way to more local arbitrary ways of enforcing personnel politics in terms of criteria for recruitment, promotion, and performance.

Service is publicly recognized as a diversity champion in Denmark and has won numerous awards and prizes on this account. Service focus on bottom-line gains that rests on a strong belief that staff diversity improves earnings by allowing staff to acquire the skills needed to service diverse customers and markets. The staff composition echoes this belief in relation to ethnicity and gender. For example, 48% of crew and 16% of managers have non-Danish background, and 52% of crew and app. 50% of the managers are women. Service's diversity policy is a part of the CSR-policy aimed at proactively employing otherwise disadvantaged groups on the labor market. Many of the employees with migrant or refugee background enter Service through publicly funded labor-market schemes in language training or internship positions.

Data collection

The ethnographic fieldwork draws on a wide range of data-generation methods (van Maanen, 2011) to gain access to multiple both managerial as well as employee voices in Service. Fieldwork in Service was carried out over a period of two years. The bulk of the empirical data was collected during an eleven-month period where the researchers worked together with or visited 40 teams all over Denmark (April 2016 to February 2017). Data generating techniques predominantly focused on participant observations, interviews and interventions. All respondents are kept anonymous.

Ethnographic participant observations were undertaken while working together with crew and supervisors/managers and participating in multiple, routine meeting forums, such team and management meetings. In 15 of the teams the researcher was trained as a 'new employee' in both cleaning and catering, which gave first hand impression on training, collaboration, team dynamics, and relationship between frontline employees and leaders. In addition, the researcher followed 30 frontline managers in their daily work (in cleaning and catering). This gave firsthand recounts of daily work relations as well as reflections on their life stories and careers. In addition, job interviews and ad-hoc social gatherings were observed. These daily observations were recorded in a fieldwork diary, which constitutes a significant part of the data.

Semi-structured interviews were guided by the initial participant observations. The researcher undertook interviews with 14 managers, each of which lasted from 40 to 120 minutes. Participants were asked to describe their career history, their daily work and relations to employees as well as Service as an organization. In addition, respondents were asked to describe the work culture, and teams and the cooperative environment in terms of information sharing, task distribution, and socializing patterns. Interviews were recorded and transcribed.

Interventions offered a possibility to test the validity of the data and the researchers' presumptions through different means; presentations, seminars, participation in debates, and informal talks; a written internal report with recommendations for practice; training frontline managers on leading diverse teams; and through continuous meetings with key organizational stakeholders.

Analytical strategy

An iterative method was applied that vacillated between fieldwork observation, interviews and interventions, reviews of theory, and data coding to condense meaning, and to generate new theoretical and empirical questions. When processing the data, the researcher translated the interviews into English. Considering the quantity and variety of the material at disposal it was decided to approach the data through grounded analysis (Charmaz, 2014). This method '...aims to derive structure (i.e. theory) from data in a process of comparing different data fragments with one another' (Easterby-Smith et al., 2015: 191). As a constructionist research design, the grounded theory recognizes the subjectivity and variability of truth and reality (Easterby-Smith et al., 2015).

Concluding discussion

The purpose of this article was to explore if and how equality in diverse teams might be fostered by team practices that stress members' differences and avoid reducing minority members to mere representatives of a (stigmatized) social group. This analysis demonstrates how there are different challenges related to gender and ethnical diversity in teams. However well-functioning diverse teams develop ways to navigate and cope with both language challenges, stereotypical perception, as well as gendered and 'ethnified' hierarchies that might otherwise arise both in heterogeneous and homogeneous teams. It is the finding that heterogeneous teams create the foundation for a prosperous collective and through solidarity across gender, age, ethnicity, and prior work experiences, education etc. This is a kind of solidarity that Durkheim termed 'organic solidarity' some odd 150 years ago (Oosterlynck et al., 2016). Organic solidarity is defined as "the willingness to share and redistribute

material and immaterial resources drawing on feelings of shared fate and group loyalty” (Stjernø 2004 and Johansen, p. 25). It is the researchers experience that diverse teams created the foundation for inclusion through organic solidarity between team members. Hence literature on the prospects of team diversity proved relevant (Gagnon and Collinson, 2017; Homan et al., 2008; Stahl et al., 2009). Organic solidarity is base in three fundamental principles: Mutual dependency, shared values and to ‘facilitate the meeting’. Mutual dependency is the source of solidarity in diverse teams as it highlights the positive aspects of social differentiation. Here is it assumed that diversity arises in division of work and the acknowledge of reciprocity by every team member performing their specific role to make the collective wok. Durkheim stressed that ”each one of the functions that the members exercise is constantly dependent upon others and constitutes with them a solidly linked system” (Durkheim, 2014: 173). Through reciprocity in regards to work performance the unique competencies of the diverse team members become displayed, utilized and hence valued. Simultaneously sense of belonging is stimulated through shared values and norms or what Durkheim termed ‘collective consciousness’. Here focus is at the symbolic and emotional components that tie the team together. Reciprocity in the team is hence based on moral commitment to the collective through shared basic values and practices (Oosterlynck et al., 2016). This is exactly what happens through shared service- and diversity based values in Service that tie the members together in strong values of an inclusive community: when team members help each other, show understanding across ages, or when colleagues with migrant background express empathy in regards to a refugee’s situation as new in the country and at the workplace and insist on helping the colleague to learn Danish. Hence exactly team diversity makes up the conditions for the potential of organic solidarity however this is intimately related to the team members’ openness to diversity. While presence of differences or minorities in a group increases the potential for interaction and thus lowers the chances of out-group effects. Then “pro-diversity beliefs” are conducive to more prosperous diverse teams. ‘Openness to diversity’ refers to group members’ positive attention to dissimilarities and hence reduce negative gender or ethnical stereotyping and categorizations (Homan et al., 2008; Paunova, 2016). Regarding team performance, Stahl et al. (2009) found that heterogeneous groups perform better when openness to diversity is high, and Homan et al. (2008) found that teams dealing with heterogeneous information show higher performance when pro-diversity beliefs are prevalent.

This contradicts the researchers experience of mechanical solidarity that characterize homogeneous teams – but might also be found in dysfunctional diversity teams with little openness to diversity. Mechanical solidarity in homogeneous team require sameness and assimilation integrating group

members into a kind of 'clan'. In clans, team members are not independent members of the group but only valuable when conforming to the collective. Independent and autonomous acts are in 'clan' teams regarded as violation or unlawful conduct. The clan community is almost exclusively defined by the common heritage, shared environment and an awareness of (cultural or ethnic) sameness. Homogenous teams build on assimilation not inclusion, and cultivate a mechanic solidarity based on stereotypical similarities and differences that the team members are 'forced' to internalize in order to avoid social sanctions and exclusion from the 'in-group': The team becomes introvert and cannot rise above the cultural in a fixed mindset. This is how the team becomes delimited by narrow and often idiosyncratic rules for behavior based on social sanctions and isolation when acting beyond the norm. This is also what Janis described as 'groupthink' (1972) leading to irrational and dysfunctional decisions in homogeneous teams striving for harmony and conformity within the group. Consequently, there is a loss of creativity and alternative solutions and hence loss in individual uniqueness and independence in the team leading to poor work performance. These findings are contradictory to research demonstrating how diverse teams might involve trade-offs conflict and power imbalances (Acker 2006; Barker, 1996; Holck, 2017; Holck and Muhr, 2017; Paunova, 2016; Tomaskovic-Devey, 2014), as this study demonstrates how homogenous teams display reduced communication and hence diminished team performance due to 'group think' and social sanctions curbing individuality and democratic decision making process.

This article demonstrates how both the composition of the team (the degree of differences) as well as 'openness to diversity' are important to release the 'diversity dividend'. This has implications for practice: First team leaders must boost and support the develop of openness to diversity in their teams. This involve human resource management efforts on education and training in 'openness to diversity', unconscious bias and the working as well as reduction of stereotypes curbing the team's performance. At the team and organizational level, common values and policies can be implemented to develop open and inclusive attitudes in the form of strategies, appraisals, and reward structures. Emphasizing positive diversity attitudes as an important code of conduct and safeguarding that organizational members behave in ways consistent with diversity values may improve the well-functioning of diverse teams. In addition, social and professional events can allow organizational members to become acquainted with each other thus develop respect for dissimilarities as interaction and relationship are well-known means to redress stereotyping and discrimination.

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