How exclusive are inclusive teams? Empowering and exploitive practices in the quest for inclusive team organisation

CMSC Stream 32: The Quality of Equality: Critically Debating Inclusion in Organisations

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Abstract

It is generally acknowledged that ethnic-minority employees are excluded or marginalized as low-skilled labour in the workplace (e.g. Ahonen et al, 2014; Gotsis and Kortzi, 2015; Johansson and Śliwa, 2014; Ortlieb and Sieben, 2013; Zanoni and Janssens, 2015). This is also the situation in Denmark that has experienced a growing diversity at the labour market for the past 25 years (Ejrnæs, 2012; Holck, 2016; Holck and Muhr, 2017; Romani et al, 2016). However, Danish organisations are increasingly encouraged to include a diverse group of employees drawing on business case arguments from diversity management literature. Two of the most predominant arguments for hiring diverse employees are either related to competences affiliated with minority background driving *innovation and creativity* potential or as *mere labour*; a way to obtain allegedly loyal, hardworking and low cost labour. In relation to the first mentioned, ethnically diverse and inclusive work teams are advocated to increase return on equity by promoting problem solving, creativity, and innovation via individually different perspectives and approaches to job tasks drawing on insights from literature on learning as well as group processes (Mitchell et al., 2015; Thatcher and Patel, 2012). The latter mentioned, which is rarely explicitly advocated by companies but are none the less the most prominent reason to employ minorities – at least according to literature – is the quest for low labor costs and a supposed "right attitude to work" (Johansson and Śliwa, 2014; Ortlieb and Sieben, 2013; Zanoni and Janssens, 2015). Often, ethnic minorities are hired under job conditions unattractive to the majority, including low wages, poor career prospects, and low reputation combined with minorities' lower bargaining power, presumed high adaptability and flexibility (Ahonen et al., 2014; Gotsis and Kortzi, 2015; Holck and Muhr, 2017).

One of the Danish companies that actively recruit immigrants and refugees is ISS Denmark, an award winning diversity champion with 50% of the employees having non-Danish background. ISS is a service company employing more than 7000 employees across Denmark. As a

consequence ISS has for the past 15 years worked to value the different skills, work experiences and competences that the many diverse employees bring into the organisation. One of these measures is to strive for a diverse composition in teams at every level in the organisation (ISS 2011) defined by a maximum of 70% homogeneity in relation to age/generation, gender and national background. Exactly organizing in diverse teams can potentially been seen as the optimal conditions for leveraging the promise of inclusion and diversity; to offer an environment where diversity is promoted and employees' differences are valued and accepted (e.g. competences, former working experience, country of origin, gender, age etc.), combined with sense of belonging to the team preventive of the social isolation that otherwise may occur if one becomes highly individuated. Hence in theory, working with diversity in teams in ISS should stimulate an inclusive organisational environment, where each employee is treated as an insider and also allowed and encouraged to retain individual uniqueness (Shore et al., 2011).

However, organisational scholars are divided between arguments of the empowering respectively exploitive aspects of the team organisation: On the one hand, especially proponents of human relation emphasize the empowering aspects of teams as fundamental to a more democratic, employee centered organization (e.g. Mitchell et al., 2015; Thatcher and Patel, 2012). On the other, critical organisational scholars of power and control highlight how teams encourage self-monitoring among peers leading to disciplining and internalizing production norms limiting internal solidarity. Allegedly empowering teams are thus a 'disguise' for normative, implicit modes of managerial control to yield higher productivity (e.g. Ahonen et al., 2014; Crowley et al, 2014; Diefenbach and Sillince, 2011; Vallas, 2003).

Combining literature on team organisation and inclusion, this paper explores the empowering and exploitive as well as inclusive and exclusive aspects of diverse teams in ISS. Empirically this is done by drawing on an ethnographic study of 30 teams in ISS. The main ambition is to inquire whether organising in diverse teams helps ISS to install a corporate ethic of care and inclusion, in a company otherwise driven by instrumental goals and tight production deadlines, and predominantly employing immigrants in temporary, low-skilled and physically straining positions. Exploring the issue of ISS between empowerment and exploitation, involves a theoretical contribution of developing a relational and context sensitive approach to literature on teams and inclusion. First of all, literature combining teams and inclusion is an emerging field (Ferdman et al., 2014; Mitchell et al., 2015; Shore et al., 2011) despite this combination's obvious benefit for progressing literature on organisational inclusion. Second, both literature on teams and inclusion predominantly draw on a normative and descriptive approach, while a

relational and situated not as developed (Dobusch, 2014; Ferdman et al., 2014; Priola et al., 2014). Hence there has long been a call for more context-sensitive research based on an organizational-level analysis that also explores the role of organizational actors and practices (Holck et al., 2016; Ortlieb and Sieben, 2013; Zanoni and Janssens, 2015). The focus on employee agency moves the study beyond a prevailing critical focus on the barriers that minority ethnic workers experience but rather explores the agency that they deploy. As power breeds resistance, unequal power relations can always be bent, circumvented, strategically appropriated, and countered, thereby creating openings for micro-emancipatory projects (Alvesson and Willmott, 1992; Goffman, 1961; Holck, 2016). An organizational-level study sensitizes the study to the minority employee's more covert acts of silent opposition and deviance, which supplement more overt and explicit resistance. In such a perspective the workplace space becomes a negotiated context in which minority strategies either sustain a certain interpretation of reality by internalizing dominant rules and norms while employing methods of self-surveillance leading to conformity; or alternatively engage in strategies that serve to create partial areas of resistance, but often at the cost of exclusion and anxiety (Ahonen *et al.*, 2014; Alvesson and Willmott, 1992; Goffman, 1961; Holck, 2016).

To make this contribution, this paper is structured as follows. In the first section, a theoretical framework that combines a context sensitive and relational approach to teams and inclusion in organisations is developed to structure the analysis and position the study. Then the method, research site, and analytical methods are presented. Next, the analysis demonstrates how diverse teams in ISS struggle with the tensions of empowerment and exploitation intersecting with practices of inclusion and exclusion among the employees sparking off minority strategies of conciliation or opposition. Finally, some basic limitations of contemporary research on teams and inclusion are flagged together with a discussion on how to promote diverse teams to the benefit of inclusion and employee empowerment.

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