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'One mirror in another': Managing diversity and the discourse of fashion

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Abstract

In this article, we report on a multi-sited ethnographic study that investigates how the discourse of fashion influenced the design and implementation of workplace diversity management programs in six organizations. These organizations, from the Canadian petroleum and insurance industries, were manipulated by an institutional field of consultants and experts into adopting relatively superficial initiatives that lacked local relevance, and produced a high level of organizational cynicism regarding diversity. In our analysis, we particularly explore one adverse effect of this discourse of fashion; that it may trigger a form of meaningless imitation by organizations adopting diversity management initiatives, resulting in superficiality and organizational cynicism. At the same time, the discourse of fashion may also hold the key to enable meaningful change, for it has a powerful influence on organizational practitioners. Our article suggests that organizations need to be aware of the institutional field, and engage with it in a manner that imbues their initiatives with local relevance, for their initiatives to contribute to meaningful organizational change.

Keywords

imitation, management fashion, multi-sited ethnography, organizational discourse, organizational isomorphism, workplace diversity

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Scholars of diversity management have periodically commented on its discursive nature, compelling us to recognize its embeddedness in an array of linguistic communities and structures. Their insights have triggered an appreciation of diversity management as a process engaged in producing complex articulations about multiple social identity groups, their place and contributions to society, the rationales behind integrating them into organizations, and the best ways of doing so (Grimes, 2002; Janssens and Zanoni, 2005; Litvin, 2002; McKay and Avery, 2005). In other words, the ways in which organizations 'talk' about workplace diversity, and access other institutional conversations about it, are integral elements of the diversity management process. Diversity management has thus been increasingly recognized as discursive in character, and constantly being influenced by other social and organizational discourses. This recognition is the starting point of this article. More specifically, we trace the influence of the discourse of fashion on the management of workplace diversity, and explore its role in mediating the design and implementation of diversity programs and policies.

We come to this focus through a four-year long multi-sited ethnographic field study that looked at multiple facets of workplace diversity policies and programs in four major Canadian oil companies and two insurance companies. Soon after the study began, it was expanded to include the suppliers of diversity management tools and materials, for example, the business consulting and educational firms that developed and marketed diversity programs to the six companies that were being studied. While the entire study as a whole examined several aspects of diversity management across several sites, this article confines itself to reporting the study's findings relating only to the role played by the discourse of fashion in shaping it. In brief, we found that the discourse of fashion drove both innovators and imitators of diversity programs, scripting their design and implementation. Critical social theorists like Benjamin (1982: 142) have warned of some of fashion's adverse effects in triggering a form of meaningless imitation in which 'the illusion of the new is reflected like one mirror in another in the appearance of the always-again-the-same'. Our article examines the varied and often paradoxical ways in which fashion shaped and informed diversity management in the organizations receiving our attention. We enter into a detailed examination of fashion's presence in the mindsets of organizational actors responsible for different aspects of diversity management, and show its influence on the kind of programs selected, their eventual implementation, and the overall organization-wide response to diversity at work.

Managing diversity and the discourse of fashion

Within the broad scholarly field of workplace diversity, a smaller sub-set of research on diversity management concerns itself primarily with the practices, policies, and programs directed at facilitating the integration of multiple social identity groups (e.g. women, disadvantaged racial groups, and ethnic minorities, etc.) within organizations. This literature has looked at various aspects of diversity management including organizational factors contributing to its success (Ogbonna and Harris, 2006; Rynes and Rosen, 1995), the positive impacts of diversity management initiatives on employee attitudes (Lobel, 1999), the importance of structured mentoring in achieving organization-wide diversity (Ragins et al., 2000), and the value of an overall strategic human resource

approach to managing diversity (Kossek et al., 2006). Some of the literature is more pre-occupied with assessing the extent to which diversity management has actually succeeded in moving organizations in a genuinely multicultural direction (Comer and Soliman, 1996; Linnehan and Konrad, 1999), in understanding why diversity management initiatives may backfire on occasion (McKay and Avery, 2005; Nemetz and Christensen, 1996; Pierce, 2003), and why organizations fail to learn from their own mistakes in managing diversity (Wooten and James, 2004).

In most of these discussions, diversity management is understood as concrete policy formulations and specific program functions such as recruitment, training, career development, and on-the-job mentoring. Periodically, however, researchers have been dwelling on the discursive dimension of diversity management, observing that diversity management emerges out of discursive constructions of organizational members (Allen, 1995; Grimes and Richard, 2003; Zanoni and Janssens, 2003), and is routinely mediated by other prominent social and organizational discourses (Kirby and Harter, 2003; Litvin, 2002; Zanoni and Janssens, 2003). In taking this position, these scholars are arguing that the language of diversity management and the ways in which managers and employees textually engage with notions of diversity are vital elements of the process.

This sensitivity to the textual nature of diversity management opens up new ways of approaching it and offers new insights into its practice. Scholars focusing on these discursive facets alert us to a range of communicative processes involved in diversity management that have noticeable effects on organizations. Local diversity management practices, for instance, are understood as situated managerial productions emerging out of specific work configurations and expectations (Janssens and Zanoni, 2005; Zanoni and Janssens, 2003), which nevertheless mediate the functional, dysfunctional, and transformational potential of diversity management programs (Aahonen and Tienari, 2009; Grimes, 2002; Hoobler, 2005). For example, Grimes (2002) has suggested that diversity management programs can either interrogate whiteness and thereby fundamentally alter power relationships between majority and minority social identity groups, or deftly preserve the status quo by means of re-centering whiteness or making it completely invisible. Diversity initiatives, somewhat paradoxically, can also serve as yet another technology of normalization (Aahonen and Tienari, 2009), smoothing over problematic differences while highlighting cosmetic ones and creating a new kind of acquiescence and docility in organizations (Hoobler, 2005). This research stream also sees the communicative paradigms of organizational members as influencing the direction of organizational change depending on whether they are drawn from ethnocentric, modernistic, or cosmopolitan world-views (Grimes and Richard, 2003).

Additionally, some scholars take a more macro approach, pointing to strong linkages between diversity management and wider social discourses. These linkages are seen as important because they provide rationales for diversity management programs and shape expectations about their implementation and effects in organizations. Past research commenting on the discursive nature of diversity management has simultaneously pointed to its linkages with other social discourses. Thus, Litvin (2002) sees it as being primarily driven by the discourse of ‘the business case’ that drives home its practical implications and attests to its power to improve organizational performance. This is echoed by Kirby and Harter (2003), who explicate on ‘the language of the bottom line’ during practices of

managing diversity. Prasad (2001), on the other hand, historically locates some of its roots in the discourse of empowerment that has also enjoyed a pervasive presence in North American organizations. While the discourse of the business case overwhelmingly casts diversity management as a pragmatic operation, the discourse of empowerment transforms it into a more idealistic initiative concerned with organizational change and social inclusion.

The findings from our empirical study further indicated the active presence of a third discourse – that of fashion – which (as we will show) in some ways straddled both the discourse of the business case/bottom line as well as the discourse of empowerment. Our study, in many ways, bridges these more macro discursive orientations to diversity management with micro ones by examining the specific ways in which the wider social discourse of fashion played out in local organizational contexts. For our purposes, we are drawing on Phillips et al's (2004: 636) definition of discourse as 'a structured collection of meaningful texts' that are embedded (as both causes and effects) in powerful institutions and practices (Bové 1995; Weedon, 1997). From a discursive standpoint, texts refer not only to written documents, but also to 'verbal reports, artwork, spoken words, pictures, symbols, buildings and other artifacts' (Phillips et al, 2004: 636), as well as meaningful action (Ricoeur, 1971).

In considering the discourse of fashion, we are looking at those texts that are enunciating themes, ideas, and logics deriving from the dynamics of fashion. Scholars of fashion have regarded it as a social phenomenon driving relatively frequent changes in consumption, be it of clothing, objects or practices (Bikhchandani et al., 1992; Craik, 1993; Entwistle, 2000). And while fashion is commonly associated with haute couture and the luxury goods industry, its encroachment into everyday spheres of modern Western societies is significant, reaching beyond the consumption of clothing and luxury items into the world of organizations and work. Furthermore, organizational policies and practices are believed to be increasingly susceptible to the influence of fashion that dictates periodic changes in managerial techniques and work arrangements (Abrahamson, 1996; Kieser, 1997; ten Bos, 2000).

Some social theorists further stress that our understanding of fashion is likely to be enhanced by recognizing its discursive properties as a semiotic text (Barthes, 1983) and a language system (Leopold, 1992; Polhemus and Proctor, 1978). According to these scholars, notions about fashion are present in a number of social texts – in the media, in local communities, and at work. These fashion texts are also observed to have a specific grammar and vocabulary (Lurie, 1981; Polhemus and Proctor, 1978). In other words, ideas and images of fashion tend to be organized around certain themes, and communicate specific meanings and logics of fashion. Thus, something that is fashionable comes to be systematically associated with notions of change, trendiness, avant-garde, novelty, and so forth because of ongoing discursive productions. As we will show, this macro discourse of fashion is likely to be fine-tuned by various actors to meet unique local circumstances. Looking at fashion as a discourse helps us go beyond conventional explanations of mindless imitation to appreciating (a) how fashion works at a deeper symbolic level by endowing certain mimetic actions with the cultural capital of dynamism and change, and (b) how certain notions such as innovation, rapid change, and being at the cutting edge come together as part of a textual system (i.e. the discourse of fashion) in influencing organizational sense-making.

The article contributes to the literature in a number of ways. Hitherto, researchers interested in the discursive dimensions of diversity management have primarily looked at discourses of the bottom line or the business case (Kirby and Harter, 2003; Litvin, 2002), that of empowerment (Prasad, 2001), exclusively local discourses driven by immediate organizational and work conditions (Zanoni and Janssens, 2003), or organizational members' mindsets (Grimes and Richard, 2003). Our examination of the discourse of fashion adds to our understanding of the role played by external discourses in diversity management. Second, it also adds to the discussion on the role of fashion in managerial practice. While empirical studies in this genre of scholarship have looked at the mediating effects of fashion on re-engineering (Jackson, 1996), quality circles, and total quality management (Abrahamson and Fairchild, 1999; Zabracki, 1998), and self-managed work teams (Nijholt and Benders, 2007), we add to this work by specifically examining fashion's role in diversity management.

Description of the study

This article grew out of a much larger research project looking at the management of diversity in four petroleum companies and two insurance companies in Canada. The study's overall objective was to develop a more comprehensive and intricate understanding of how diversity management is conceptualized, implemented, and received in organizations. The study is best characterized as a multi-sited ethnography of diversity management. Unlike more conventional ethnographies (e.g. Kunda, 1992) that tend to focus intensively on a single organization, a multi-sited ethnography gives a similar kind of close attention to select phenomena in different organizational sites (Prasad and Prasad, 2009).

The practice of multi-sited ethnography was introduced by reputed cultural anthropologist, George Marcus (1999) who advocated broadening the scope of ethnography while still retaining its basic principles. In essence, Marcus (1999) offers guidelines for expanding the contours of conventional ethnography so that our understanding of organizational sense-making, actions, and structures is not restricted by an organization's putative boundaries. The rationale for such a position comes out of recognition that organizations rarely act in isolation, have increasingly permeable boundaries, and are highly susceptible to a spectrum of influences from other organizations and institutions. As Marcus (1999: 79) urges, cultural analysis needs 'to move out of the single sites and local situations of conventional ethnography designs to examine the circulation of cultural objects, meanings and identities in diffuse time-space.' We should note that this heightened emphasis on circulation and movement is not intended to displace the traditional ethnographic focus on local interpretations and actions, but to reconnect them to wider social events and mindsets.

In a multi-sited ethnography, the researcher does not confine his/her observations and analysis to a single organization or location but follows specific social phenomena as they travel between different actors and networks in multiple institutional domains. Some multi-sited ethnographies also examine specific phenomena in a number of similar or dissimilar organizations in order to grasp broader socio-cultural patterns. One of the hallmarks of multi-sited ethnographies is to be found in the strategy of following advocated by Marcus (1999). In essence, Marcus proposes that researchers closely follow selected

social phenomena through multiple organizational locations rather than observe multiple social phenomena within a single organization or location. Thus, multi-sited ethnographies can track people (e.g. expatriate managers, minority executives, female bond traders, etc.), products (e.g. coffee, sushi, T-shirts, etc.), conflicts (over resources or social issues), life-histories, laws, policies, and an array of discourses as they wind in and out of multiple organizational locations.

The present study was a multi-sited ethnography that looked at the management of workplace diversity in six major Canadian corporations. Our initial research questions were somewhat broad and were: (1) How is diversity management conceptualized and implemented in the Canadian petroleum and insurance industries?; and (2) How are diversity management practices interpreted by organization members in these industries? After a preliminary pilot study in Onyx Corporation (oil company), we refined the questions to include one that asked: How is diversity management discursively produced in these industries? In addressing this question, it soon became evident that in order to develop a more meaningful understanding of diversity management as a discourse, we needed to expand our focus beyond the six companies being studied to include the suppliers of diversity management tools and techniques – the various consulting firms and educators who develop and offer workplace diversity programs and materials to different organizations and industries. In pursuing this study, our data collection included three components.

The first component involved ethnographic observations of organizational interactions and events that were related to the management of diversity. Primarily, this included observations of diversity training sessions at four different petroleum companies (referred to in this study as Onyx Corporation, Gladiator Inc., Tower Corporation, and Marvel) and two insurance companies (herein called Omega and Midas). In Onyx and Omega, we were also able to observe two sessions in which the companies' own human resource personnel were trained in diversity management by external consultants. Observations were also made of internal meetings (at Gladiator, Onyx, Tower, and Midas) that listed diversity management on the agenda. We also attended a diversity conference for practitioners held in Philadelphia with the intent of observing the discussions in this milieu. This conference (lasting 1.5 days) was selected because a number of human resource managers from the companies being studied were regular attendees at it.

The second component of the study comprised a series of in-depth ethnographic interviews with (a) diversity consultants and trainers engaged in offering programs and workshops to the six organizations being studied, (b) personnel directors, human resource managers/directors and diversity managers in these organizations, and (c) participants and attendees of diversity workshops drawn from a range of social identity groups. Appendix A provides a complete list of interview subjects.

The third component involved an examination of different documents relevant to the diversity management process. These included fliers, brochures, and other promotional materials detailing workplace diversity programs as well as training exercises and cases used in the workshop, diversity videos, and other educational information circulated by trainers. The researchers also collected substantial background information on each organization in order to have a richer context for the analysis of all data.

Data analysis was conducted according to the broad conventions of qualitative research whereby common themes and patterns were tracked across all the organizations in the study. These themes emerged in multiple organizational domains from conversations and remarks, formal announcements, memos, interview transcripts, promotional and instructional material, discussions during and after workshops, formal reports, and the like. Early into our data analysis we noticed a number of themes coalescing around elements of the discourse of fashion including the perceived value of following managerial trends, the role of external consulting firms in designing cutting-edge diversity programs, local organizational disenchantment with 'brand-name' diversity programs, and so forth. On even closer examination, we concluded that our findings spoke to specific dimensions of the relationship between diversity management and the discourse of fashion. They were (a) the nature and levels of fashion consciousness among diversity managers/trainers, consultants, and other organizational members, (b) the dynamics whereby some diversity initiatives became trendy, and (c) the direct and indirect effects of the discourse of fashion on the implementation of, and reception to, diversity initiatives in the six corporations being studied. The remainder of this article elaborates on these dimensions of the fashion-diversity management relationship.

The pervasiveness of fashion in managing diversity

In studying diversity management, we focused on policy initiatives and programs regarding the hiring and promotion of individuals from diverse social identity groups, diversity training workshops, and periodic self-evaluations of organizational diversity. In this section, we document local references to the discourse of fashion in the context of diversity management and the meanings it held for organizational members and consultants involved in diversity programs. While the word fashion itself may not always have been used, a number of themes and ideas closely linked to the grammar and vocabulary of fashion (Lurie, 1981) (e.g. trendiness, rapid change, etc.) repeatedly surfaced in meetings, discussions, and conversations about workplace diversity management. We should note here that the discourse of fashion did indeed have some overlap with other discourses that have previously been identified with diversity management, notably with the discourse of the business case/bottom line and the discourse of empowerment. Nevertheless, the discourse of fashion was also quite distinctive, with its singular focus on mutability, imitation, and being at the cutting edge of things.

To begin with, our study indicated a high level of fashion consciousness among both the organizational suppliers and consumers of workplace diversity programs. The personnel director of Onyx Corporation, for example, who was also responsible for diversity training in the organization, justified her decision to use the services of XYZ, their principal (and somewhat expensive) diversity consultant by referring to their trendy and novel approaches:

> We went with XYZ because they were not into the same old ideas – you know the hippie images of the seventies. They are real professionals, and are willing to change their programs to give us something new each time.

Further, during a meeting wherein the company's diversity workshops were discussed, the same personnel director praised XYZ for its ability to be 'ahead of the pack' in offering new visions of workplace diversity.

'Being up to speed' and 'moving ahead of the times' were regarded as valuable attributes by a number of human resource managers in the oil and insurance industries, especially given their concerns over these industries' deeply-entrenched conservative images and identities. To some of them, workplace diversity management efforts (which in themselves were seen as fashionable) offered a way of redefining public perceptions of their organizations. In Gladiator Inc., one of the human resource managers argued that:

> We are stuck with this oil patch image . . . it's hard to shake off our red-neck personality and that can be a real problem for us – in general that is. I think everyone is hoping that our support of this diversity stuff will change all that a bit – will make people realize that even we are at the forefront of employee relations.

Later in the interview, the same manager also stressed the importance of engaging a consulting firm that had a strong reputation for its 'cutting-edge' approach.

Fashion's symbolic value was not missed by the consulting firms whose own representatives emphasized the importance of designing workplace diversity programs that were 'with it' and 'moved with the times'. To one of the experienced diversity trainers from XYZ, it was equally important to 'change your song to fit the hip new tunes', and in discussing why XYZ began offering diversity audits in place of cultural awareness programs (which thus far had been the mainstay of their diversity line), he also argued that:

> . . . that old sensitivity stuff has no selling power any more. You've got to give it [diversity] more management appeal – link it to efficiency or performance, somehow connect it to saving money. That's the feeling of the times.

In concrete terms, the discourse of fashion produced a series of bandwagon effects with workplace diversity initiatives following certain trends at different periods of time. In the early nineties, for instance, programs under the rubric of 'Valuing Diversity' or 'Cultural Awareness' celebrated and endorsed ethnic, sexual, and racial differences. By the mid-nineties, however, the trend was for diversity audits designed to assess and evaluate an organization's ability to incorporate and deal with differences. Five out of the six organizations studied by us adopted some form or other of diversity audits (sometimes also referred to as diversity climate studies) between 1994 and 1996. Diversity audits were more about measurement and evaluation and often used the language and concepts of accounting. By 1997, the mood had changed once again and all six firms were engaged in introducing workshops to enhance the effectiveness of multicultural work teams. Increasingly, global and international diversity was also becoming a theme in workplace diversity management, with organizations introducing cross-cultural training programs for managers who were anticipating foreign assignments and for expatriate managers in Canada and the United States. Just before our study was concluded, we also noticed that HR managers in both the insurance companies and in two of the petroleum companies were considering a new set of diversity programs that were being marketed by external

consultants under the rubric of 'strategic diversity'. Strategic diversity – intended to train managers in the use of diversity at the level of strategic planning – indeed eventually became the next wave of diversity programs in all the organizations that we studied.

The discourse of fashion also triggered a substantial recycling process whereby old ideas, games, and cases were often repackaged under new labels. For instance, many of the training exercises and worksheets used by trainers in the cultural awareness programs of the early nineties were subsequently refurbished and used again in multicultural team training sessions. For the organizations and individuals concerned, following the dictates of fashion also meant that diversity themes needed to be constantly updated and fused with other fashionable management practices. In Utopia Ltd. (a consulting firm), for instance, it was widely accepted that diversity issues had to be blended with currently popular ideas for them to appeal to organizational customers:

> Diversity is not a stand-alone matter. It has to be a part of an organization's life. Right now the big thing for organizations is working in teams and the real challenge for us is to train people to work well in diverse teams. (Consultant, Utopia Inc.)

Even some in-house training programs were susceptible to the pressures of fashion. In Tower Corporation, for example, the human resources department worked hard during the summer of 1997 to shift their focus from diversity and personal audits to cross-cultural teamwork. Sets of personal inventories that had been the mainstay of the earlier diversity audit programs in Tower Corporation were refurbished to give them a more cosmopolitan flair. In this process, the basic structure itself of the inventories was not altered, but there was some appearance of novelty via a more international or cross-cultural bent.

Being fashionable also demanded a certain amount of conscious isomorphism on the part of HR personnel and diversity managers, all of whom tried to keep themselves informed (through formal channels as well as the informal grapevine) about diversity programs in other companies in their own industries and in other industries that were considered to be leaders in the area of employee relations. In their quest to keep up with fashionable and current practices, the human resource personnel in all the companies that we studied were constantly engaged (to varying degrees) in a game of imitation, making sure that new workplace diversity programs adopted in other organizations were also introduced into their own companies. These pressures were often fully recognized by individuals such as the director of employee relations at Midas Corp., who had worked very hard at increasing her budget in order to update the company's diversity program. In her words:

> We can't afford to be behind any other company in this. We have embraced diversity. Now we must stay with it. Some of our programs are really old and out-of-touch with what's going on everywhere else. One reason we've hired Anita [diversity manager] is that she can keep us up-to-date with whatever is going on elsewhere. (Director of employee relations, Midas Corp.)

Thus, almost inevitably and somewhat paradoxically, the discourse of fashion also gave rise to a substantial amount of standardization of diversity management practices that

was strongly brought in evidence during the course of our study. At the same time, such standardization held a distinctly positive symbolic value, because it seemed to reassure significant organizational constituents that the organization concerned was not out-of-step with industry-wide practices. Organizations, especially those in the oil and insurance sectors, are notoriously conservative and are understandably anxious about being seen as 'deviant' in any way. Since these organizations also tended to select a fairly common set of 'reputed' consulting firms to guide them on workplace diversity management, their programs ended up resembling each other considerably in terms of content, style and, execution.

Setting and following diversity management fashions

One of the themes to emerge from the study was the setting and following of fashions/trends in diversity management. To better understand this phenomenon, we had to first map out the institutional field of workplace diversity management. An institutional field is a more complex and comprehensive concept than that of industry and refers to 'those organizations that in the aggregate, constitute a recognized area of institutional life: key suppliers, resource and product consumers, regulatory agencies and other organizations that produce similar services and products' (DiMaggio and Powell, 1991: 64–5). Certainly, in our study, the development of a distinct institutional field played an important role in the spread of diversity management fashion in the companies that were being studied.

We found that an institutional field of diversity management emerged to meet the needs of organizations (public and private) that had instituted a range of programs and practices dealing with workplace diversity. These organizations (the principal consumers of diversity management) were serviced by a range of consulting firms and educational agencies who offered training programs, diversity climate consultation, and who sold products such as training videos, course materials, implementation manuals, employee surveys, etc. The institutional field also included publishers and authors of popular books dealing with the topic of diversity management and organizers of conferences in this area.

In sum, it was our observation that an institutional field involving suppliers and customers of diversity management products/services, experts, public policy advocates, and other interested actors has emerged in North America. One of the key characteristics of any institutional field is the increased and repeated interaction, and greater interdependence between specific groups and individuals (DiMaggio and Powell, 1991). This was certainly the case in this study. We found that major suppliers of diversity management products and tools regularly interacted with each other, and closely followed each other's activities in diversity conferences and other professional forums. Diversity consultants and practitioners were also institutionally linked through their memberships in professional organizations such as the American society for Training and Development and the Conference Board. We also found considerable movement and circulation of diversity management experts (a) across different consulting firms, (b) across different corporations engaged in managing diversity, and (c) between consulting firms and their corporate clients.

Diversity conferences also played a key role in the fashion setting process as they were attended by members of different consulting firms and the human resource and diversity managers from organizations engaged in implementing various diversity management programs. What resulted was a strongly networked set of groups, individuals, and organizations that had close interactions on a regular basis, and exchanged ideas about managing diversity. Four out of the six organizations in our study consistently sponsored managers from their personnel and human resource departments to attend these conferences as a way of upgrading their professional skills and qualifications. At these conferences, diversity managers from different organizations developed contacts with specific consulting firms and were exposed to popular trends that were developing with respect to managing diversity.

We found that a handful of firms were prominent in dictating trends around diversity management. These fashion setters shared a few common characteristics: (a) all of them enjoyed an early mover advantage in the field, (b) they had developed strong reputations in consulting for US and Canadian governmental agencies, and (c) they were staffed with experts who were credentialed by and connected to prestigious ivy-league business schools in the US. Thus, the first round of fashion setting was done by prominent and reputed consulting firms who routinely presented their ideas and sold their diversity products at various key conferences. The human resource personnel and diversity managers of the oil and insurance companies we studied were definitely in the role of followers and adopters of these ideas and initiatives.

In following these trends, the corporate managers were also influenced by their professional peers in other industries (notably electronics and retail) that were recognized locally as being at the cutting edge of employment relations practices. The following remark by a human resource manager at Gladiator indicates the importance of peer companies in trend setting in diversity management:

> I don't really think our company keeps up with the latest developments in anything – certainly not in diversity. I would personally like to put us on the map with this, so I keep my eyes open and see what other places are doing – like the guys in Hewlett: they are usually onto a good thing right away. So when I heard that they were doing this diversity audit thing, I felt it would be, uh, a good thing for us to investigate, and guess what? Before we know it, the entire oil industry in Alberta was doing the same thing.

In meetings held to discuss changes in components of the diversity programs, human resource managers from Midas and Marvel also justified their shift to diversity audits by pointing out that these programs were being adopted by companies that were reputed for their advances in employment relations.

We should note here that HR professionals in both the petroleum and insurance industries saw their own organizations as definitely lagging behind in the race to adopt new and fashionable management techniques in general and diversity management in particular. Many of them were, therefore, quite careful about making sure that they followed what other and supposedly 'cutting-edge' companies were doing. Thus, in the case of diversity management, fashion was set by a few well-known diversity consulting firms and some of the Fortune 500 firms that were quick to adopt new diversity management trends. While

many of the HR and diversity managers in our study deplored their own organizations' conservatism in this area, there was also a sense of safety in playing the role of fashion follower when it came to workplace diversity management. This feeling is well captured by the HR vice-president of one of the insurance companies, who observed that:

> In general, we are quite risk averse, as you know. That is our business and that is our ethos. And this diversity stuff can become quite volatile and well almost, uh, volcanic. You don't want it blowing up in our faces. We like to see how it works elsewhere and then try it out here. That way we get to play with new ideas, but we also wait till we know they are less risky.

In general, while being fashionable and at the cutting edge was important to many of the managers in the organizations we studied, they were largely content to follow managerial fashions in diversity management rather than try to set those fashions themselves.

Effects of the discourse of fashion on managing diversity

Fashion's role in the design and delivery of diversity programs exerted significant influence over organizational dispositions toward workplace diversity. This should come as no surprise as other researchers have already noted that management fashions can have serious consequences for a multitude of organizational processes (Abrahamson, 1996; Kieser, 1997; Staw and Epstein, 2000). These consequences can be either direct or somewhat indirect. Its direct effects were to legitimate organizational efforts to champion inclusiveness through a number of formal diversity management programs. Its indirect effects could be observed in the frustrations surrounding the standardization of fashionable diversity management training programs. Both sets of effects are elaborated in this section.

Fashion as a vehicle of change

Diversity management's close discursive connections to fashion served directly as a vehicle for change. To begin with, fashion had paved the way for the very introduction of diversity management initiatives in these companies. In a number of interviews and conversations, human resource managers at various levels in these companies reminisced about the useful role that fashion had played in convincing senior management that workplace diversity programs were necessary for their organizations. For instance, Marsha (senior vice-president of employment relations in Midas) observed:

> We got going on the diversity thing because it was the thing at the time. We would never have got permission to go ahead if it had not been such a big buzzword at the time.

Others also pointed out that the generally conservative cultures of petroleum and insurance companies did not predispose them to take a proactive position on workplace diversity management. However, the undeniable fact that diversity management was becoming fashionable and in vogue gave it considerable appeal, and persuaded the senior managements of these companies to make it a part of their organizations as well. In the case of diversity management, fashion was thus central to breaking down some of the local

(i.e. organization level) resistance to multiculturalism and diversity at the workplace. While this did not prevent the ambiguous routines of 'resistance by consent' (Ashcraft, 2005) from being enacted at the workplace, it did function to preempt more direct forms of resistance from a variety of organizational actors.

In the companies we studied, fashion served as a particularly important vehicle for facilitating change, because diversity had often been seen in these organizations as a 'volcanic' and potentially 'disruptive' issue that senior managers, in general, were reluctant to touch during the late 1980s and early 1990s. However, when these senior managers recognized that workplace diversity management was an unstoppable trend, they felt more reassured about its potential value for their own firms and, equally, they also seem to have been concerned that their companies should not be seen as missing out on a new and fashionable management practice. Once diversity management had been institutionalized within the companies, the subsequent shifts to different diversity programs (e.g. diversity audits, strategic diversity, etc.) also took place under the influence of fashion.

Isomorphism and the lack of local relevance

The discourse of fashion also triggered indirect effects through its role in standardizing practices of managing diversity. Along with the discourse of the bottom line, the discourse of fashion gave rise to high levels of isomorphism in the structure and implementation of diversity management. As discussed earlier, the widespread desire to keep up with current trends in management meant that only certain practices were adopted in all six organizations. Indeed, the diversity management workshops and training programs in the six firms bore a striking resemblance to each other, and were, in some cases, virtually identical. This isomorphism was clearly consequential in how workplace diversity initiatives were received by organizational members. We would posit that in their efforts to follow diversity fashions, individual organizations lost sight of many local diversity related dynamics. This sentiment was shared by a number of employees who had participated in the workshops and training programs.

This sense that diversity management was lacking in local relevance was strongest in the four petroleum companies that had outsourced many diversity management functions to consulting firms from North Carolina and Georgia. The diversity sessions conducted (in Canada) by those consultants from the US carried a strong flavor of the American Civil Rights Movement and the Women's Movement of the 1970s and systematically focused on problems faced by African Americans and professional white women. This focus was evident in the opening statements made by the trainers, as well as in the cases, scenarios and role-playing exercises used to stimulate discussions on various workplace diversity issues.

To many workshop participants, including supervisors dealing with problems of demographic/cultural difference on a day-to-day basis, these workshops appeared to be tailored to address a set of concerns that were not of immediate relevance to their own organizations having a uniquely Canadian context. Frustration around this issue surfaced repeatedly in both formal interviews and informal conversations. Managers in all four oil companies pointed out that diversity-related challenges and tensions in their own organizations were more likely to revolve around issues involving such identity groups as South Asians, Francophones from Quebec, First Nation or Aboriginal peoples,

and individuals with different sexual orientations. However, it was widely felt among the participants that the workshops did little to address those issues. Even worse, many participants also felt that the consultant-trainers had little awareness of, or interest in, the unique diversity-related challenges and dilemmas specifically facing the organizations the consultants were supposed to be helping. The following two excerpts from interviews and conversations with workshop participants illustrate this feeling:

> The real sad thing is that I learned nothing from them – except that I, and some of the other guys as well, were really prejudiced. Well maybe that's true but they [trainers] were coming from a completely different place and knew nothing about our problems. They were really mainly into Black issues – but we don't even have Blacks here. I'm dealing with these two women from Quebec – Francophones. They're really great, fantastic workers . . . but they have real problems with so many folks here especially when they start talking in French to each other . . . I was not expecting any easy answers but when experts could not gauge what we are dealing with here – the baggage of Quebec, language, separation, and all that, I'll say it's a real waste of my time. (Manager, accounting division, Tower Corp.)

> It's a bit fuzzy in my mind – what we are supposed to get from these things. I'm Cree and have been dealing with injustice issues all my life. There were these two other First Nation's people and we tried to raise some points in the discussion about land rights and working with cultures who have taken away all that we had. I could see this didn't fit into their agenda . . . after a while I started to keep real quiet about this. But I don't think they were expecting to meet a different angle on diversity. To be honest, I don't think they are really prepared for it. (Promotion manager, Tower Corp.)

Diversity consultants themselves were well aware that their programs were not always meeting the unique requirements of specific organizational situations. However, given their hectic schedules and busy lives, they were rarely in a position to make meaningful changes in their standardized workshop formats with a view to addressing this problem. For many of them, moreover, complaints about this problem were simply excuses for not taking diversity workshops seriously. Other consultants argued that if the broad messages they imparted took hold of the participants, the substance of those messages could easily be extended to different organizational contexts and their unique diversity-related problems and dilemmas. However, what remained among the participants themselves was a strong perception that these diversity programs were largely de-contextualized and not tailored to address local issues and, hence, not actually designed to deal with 'real' organizational problems concerning workplace diversity.

Fashion, superficiality, and organizational cynicism

A second indirect effect of the discourse of fashion could be found in its contribution to widespread organizational cynicism about the superficiality of diversity management. The organizations in our study gained legitimacy for their diversity programs partly through their consistent adoption of fashionable and trendy initiatives. Being fashionable in the diversity management area mostly implied hiring the reputed US based consulting firms and regularly changing diversity initiatives at the workplace. Indeed it

was our observation that the 'brand' or 'designer label' of a program was a central criterion for its adoption.

These 'brand' programs, however, were widely regarded (by the targets of diversity management) as being quite superficial in content and approach with their reliance on catchy slogans, platitudes about the collective benefits of workplace diversity and simplistic cases and exercises. Theorists of fashion have previously observed that the discourse of fashion's vocabulary of appearance and image gives rise to superficiality as a central internal theme (Benjamin, 1982; Faurschou, 1990; Lurie, 1981). They also suggest that the discourse of fashion implicitly legitimizes the cosmetic and the surface aspects of social phenomena at the expense of the in-depth and profound dimensions of it (Leopold, 1992; Lurie, 1981).

It should come as no surprise that when the discourse of fashion is pervasive in the discourse of diversity management, significant attention comes to be accorded to the cosmetic and simpler facets of the process. A number of consultants and internal company managers presented material at training programs and workshops that bypassed the more challenging and recalcitrant aspects of multiculturalism at work. For many of them, what was most important was that their programs were at the leading edge of the trends of the time. As a result, diversity was uniformly presented in a positive light with little attention being paid to the more thorny problems and conflicts arising from an increased presence of diverse social identity groups in the workplace. While the discourse of fashion may not have been the only social force fostering this superficiality, it nevertheless played a vital role in doing so.

It is worth briefly examining how the superficiality of the programs mediated the interactions in the diversity training sessions and the attitudes of workshop participants. Even in those few cases where the more problematic and thorny aspects of diversity were touched upon, the approach adopted by diversity consultants and trainers sought to confine the entire discussion to issues of individual ignorance and prejudice, and was reluctant to explore the systemic and institutionalized nature of exclusionary mechanisms at work. For instance, in one of the workshops conducted at Gladiator, a participant (a financial analyst) significantly raised the tension level of the room when he directly confronted the trainers with the problem of organization-wide homophobia. The trainers, however, were quick to diffuse the tension by narrating a story about another firm in which a talented gay executive successfully won over his prejudiced colleagues with the help of a diversity program, by staying 'positive', and by continuing to be an exemplary 'professional'. It was quite clear that these trainers were reluctant to thoroughly discuss the multi-faceted question of systemic homophobia. A few weeks later, in an interview with the same workshop participant, we heard his own sentiments about this episode:

> What I found most discouraging was their complete unwillingness to confront the real problems that we have in this company. I know these guys here. They are homophobic in their gut. . . . What is the point of dancing around this and hoping it will go away if we simply talk about how good diversity is for business and for everybody. (Financial analyst, Gladiator Corp.)

Similar sentiments about the trainers' unwillingness to confront widespread sexism, racism, homophobia, and xenophobia were expressed by employees who had attended

workshops at all the organizations included in our study. In other words, diversity consultants and practitioners either only stressed the brighter side of diversity, or located the origins of the troubling aspects of workplace diversity within individual prejudice. On some occasions when workshop participants questioned the economic efficacy of multicultural teams, such concerns were smoothed over, or attributed to lingering fears of old prejudices. Serious questions about identity conflicts and wider structural impediments to achieving a genuinely multicultural and diverse workplace sometimes raised by minority ethnic group members or gays were also rarely addressed.

This resulted in a deep level of skepticism bordering on cynicism on the part of workshop participants from both majority (Euro-Canadian and Euro-American male) and minority groups (notably Francophone, First Nation, Hispanic, Gay/Lesbian, and South Asian groups). The prevalent sense among the participants seemed to be that the various corporate diversity programs were largely trivial in nature and not really designed to address genuine injustices or tensions revolving around workplace diversity. Witness, for instance, the following observation by one of the workshop participants:

> It really is a feel-good exercise. You know, we can all feel good that we are this happy multicolored family – that's going to bring in all this money for the firm. The truth is quite another matter. If people are really different, they don't get along that easily, they want to do things differently, they get upset about how they are told to do work. . . . I was working with this project group with a woman from Mexico and a man from Puerto Rico and they ganged up on me all the time. Maybe I do the same with my buddies, but isn't that human nature? Can we at least talk about it instead of pretending that different people will automatically work together like one big happy family? (Manager, Midas Co.)

Ironically, the sense that diversity management was mostly cosmetic and 'without teeth' was shared by many groups in all the organizations we studied. The result was that many participants failed to take these programs seriously, thereby also triggering a self-fulfilling prophecy that seems to have relegated workplace diversity management to a mostly symbolic space. While other factors may also have contributed to the superficial treatment of workplace diversity issues, the discourse of fashion remained one of the stronger forces behind this phenomenon.

Discussion: Paradoxical effects of the discourse of fashion on the management of workplace diversity

Our study builds on prior research that diversity management in organizations is a discursive act. However, the empirical analysis in our article further augments that research, by using it as a springboard to study the discourse of fashion within the context of diversity management in six corporations. In this article, we have documented its pervasive presence, its influence over the trajectory of diversity programs and initiatives, the individuals and institutions that shaped it, and its direct and indirect effects on organizations. Clearly, the discourse of fashion was a ubiquitous presence in diversity management with its own distinct vocabulary and grammar that shaped a dynamic that was endlessly imitating the 'new' and in pursuit of the leading edge in trends.

The organizations that were the initial object of our study, that is, the six firms operating in the Canadian petroleum and insurance industries, had lesser experience of diversity than their counterparts from other sectors. This, coupled with their desire to emulate more 'fashionable' purveyors of diversity management, unfortunately led them to fall prey to an institutional field of consultants and experts, who deployed the language of fashion to coax them into adopting relatively superficial initiatives in the name of diversity management. Unfortunately, those initiatives lacked local relevance and had a counterproductive effect; instead of initiating change in the direction of sensitivity and accommodation, they produced a high level of organizational cynicism with regard to both diversity and similar future initiatives. Thus, our analysis notably laid bare one adverse effect of this discourse of fashion; that it may trigger a form of meaningless imitation by organizations practicing diversity management initiatives.

We believe that the conclusions of our study have clear implications both for the management of fashion literature, and for scholars and practitioners of diversity. Here, we highlight three specific conclusions that can be drawn from our study.

First, the study highlights the contested terrain of diversity management along two broad axes, and offers a way in which these approaches may be reinterpreted. While supporters of workplace diversity management often express disappointment over its failure to fully achieve its reformist goals (Linnehan and Konrad, 1999), its opponents are frequently concerned that in its reformist zeal it regularly overreaches itself, placing greater value on an individual's social identity than on the person's individual merit and competence (Lasch-Quinn, 2001). Both these groups tend to view the practice of diversity management through a *reformist* lens, and see it as often failing to follow certain valued principles: in one case, the principles of multiculturalism and social justice, in the other case those of equality and meritocracy. Our study shows that workplace diversity management needs to be understood as a product not only of reformist elements and impulses, but also of a distinct *institutional* field with well-defined dynamics and facing multiple forces and pressures, including those exerted by the discourse of fashion. In light of this understanding, diversity management initiatives that are conscious of the institutional field in which they are imbedded can avoid the pitfalls of local irrelevance, and yet use the fashion trends as vehicles of organizational change.

Second, our article also finds that the discourse of fashion plays a crucial yet paradoxical role in the diversity management process. Primarily, fashion seems to have facilitated the initial organizational adoption of diversity management programs, as well as their subsequent transformations, by lending these programs the credibility and legitimacy that sometimes accrues to management practices as a result of being seen as 'innovative' and 'new'. In the case of managing workplace diversity – an idea that was initially viewed somewhat skeptically by many corporate managements in the petroleum and insurance industries – fashion served to instill a degree of confidence about its value to the organization. As a matter of fact, the discourse of fashion put considerable pressure on these organizations to invest in diversity management programs, because not to do so was to risk being seen as old-fashioned and behind the times. Hence, our study suggests that sometimes fashion may play a functional role by serving as a vehicle that facilitates certain forms of workplace reforms in relatively conservative and risk-averse organizations that might otherwise be hesitant to adopt such reforms.

Finally, our study also suggests that many managers may consciously and intentionally follow management fashions, because they are aware of the symbolic capital (Bourdieu, 1986) that may come with new fashions. Keeping up with management fashions often bestows a certain legitimacy on organizations that do so. This legitimacy can eventually trickle down to the level of the departments and personnel who made the decision to follow the lead of fashion in the first place, and thereby lend added credibility to those departments and personnel. Additionally, our study shows some managers seem to have used the discourse of fashion with relative deliberation, in order to shield new organization-wide diversity management initiatives from controversy and hostility. In other words, those managers who recognized the value of workplace diversity management and worked to introduce such programs within their own organizations, sometimes deliberately used the very fact of the fashionable nature of diversity management programs as a shield to protect themselves from the disapproval and skepticism of some of their own colleagues and superiors. In such cases also fashion seems to have played a functional role.

At the same time, however, following the dictates of fashion may also sometimes result in certain dysfunctional consequences for organizational programs and initiatives. By their very nature, management fashions are less sensitized to the local dynamics of individual organizations, and more in tune with external trends and imperatives. Hence, management practices and programs that may be excessively conscious of pressures of fashion – such that they completely conform to and replicate new management fashions in their minutest details – are unlikely to meet immediate local requirements. Somewhat paradoxically, therefore, while following management fashions does sometimes enhance an organization's legitimacy in the eyes of internal and external stakeholders, fashions' frequent lack of local relevance also implies that the organization's internal legitimacy may become relatively diminished over time.

Further, although the discourse of fashion may sometimes facilitate much needed change in organizations, such change frequently tends to be relatively cosmetic in nature and lacking in substance. Similarly, taking the lead in adopting new management fashions is often intended to differentiate an organization from its peer organizations. However, the very appeal of successful management fashions also implies that these are very quickly imitated by other organizations, and the paradoxical result is even greater uniformity (rather than differentiation) across these organizations. In the same way, imitating new management fashions may sometimes look like a somewhat irrational act on the part of individual organizations. Viewed from a perspective that recognizes the crucial significance of organizational legitimacy, however, it would appear to be yet another paradox of fashion that such seemingly irrational actions may often be fully rational. Thus, our study throws light on a variety of paradoxical aspects of management fashions.

We would like to end by revisiting our metaphor of 'one mirror in another' as a critique of meaningless imitation and false sense of novelty. As our article has shown, fashion in the diversity industry is a double-edged sword, deployable both for the purposes of enabling meaningful change and for the maintenance of organizational status quo. It is only when the parallel mirrors of isomorphism and the institutional field are replaced by a single mirror of change can diversity initiatives be rendered locally relevant, organizationally meaningful, and sensitive to the growing diversity that is the reality of all organizations.

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Appendix A Subjects interviewed for study (pseudonyms used)

Organization	Position of subjects
Onyx Corporation (Petroleum)	Personnel Director (1) Divisional HR Managers (3) Workshop Participants (7)
Gladiator Corporation (Petroleum)	Vice-President, Diversity and Organizational Change (1) Human Resource Manager (1) Workshop Participants (5)
Tower Corporation (Petroleum)	Vice-President, Human Resources & Employee Relations (1) Divisional Managers (4) Workshop Participants (4)
Marvel Company (Petroleum)	Director, Industrial Relations & Human Resources (1) Director, Diversity Project (1) Workshop Participants (4)
Midas Corporation (Insurance)	Director, Employment Relations (1) Senior Vice-President, HR (1) Training Managers (2) Workshop Participants (5)
Omega Corporation (Insurance)	Director, Diversity and Organizational Development (1) Director, Human Resources (1) Workshop Participants (4)
XYZ Corporation (Consulting)	Trainers (6) Director, Corporate Planning & Strategy (1)
Utopia Inc. (Consulting)	Diversity Trainers (4)

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