Many diversities for many services: Theorizing diversity (management) in service companies

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ABSTRACT   Contrary to current definitions of diversity as a set of a priori socio-demographic characteristics, this study re-conceptualizes diversity as an organizational product. Through the analysis of qualitative data from four service organizations, we show that organization-specific understandings of diversity are based on the way employees' socio-demographic differences affect the organization of work, either contributing to it or hampering it. Such understandings of diversity, in turn, shape organization-specific approaches to diversity management. From our empirical results, we further inductively derive two dimensions of service processes that appear to play a central role in shaping diversity (management) in service organizations: customers' proximity versus invisibility and diversity-customized versus profession-customized service. We conclude the article on a more critical note, reflecting on how specific constellations of work/understanding of diversity/diversity management enable and/or constrain employees' agency, including the possibility to challenge existing power relations.

KEYWORDS   customers ▪ diversity ▪ diversity management ▪ power ▪ services

Diversity studies generally define diversity by referring to one or more employees' socio-demographic traits such as gender, race, ethnicity and age, and subsequently examine the effects of these differences on a variety of

organizational practices and outcomes (see Milliken & Martins, 1996 for a review). In recent years, however, a few diversity scholars have increasingly expressed dissatisfaction with this kind of research. The major point of critique is that, while focusing on the effects of diversity, this approach has left the notion of diversity itself undertheorized (Nkomo & Cox, 1996). The use of socio-demographic traits as independent variables to operationalize diversity has de facto led to an understanding of diversity as a given, fixed individual or group essence (Litvin, 1997). Following Nkomo and Cox's (1996) plea for theorizing diversity, some scholars (e.g. Ely & Thomas, 2001; Harrison, Price & Bell, 1998) have started to develop more theory-driven perspectives on diversity. They look at diversity in more dynamic ways, identifying a number of variables that mediate and moderate the effects of diversity on organizational outcomes. Nonetheless, they still consider diversity as a set of given socio-demographic characteristics rather than as an organizational product embedded in organizational power relations.

The present article intends to contribute towards a re-conceptualization of diversity through examining how organizations produce diversity. We show that the way in which work is organized strongly affects the company's understanding of diversity as well as its approach to diversity management. From this theoretical perspective, employees' socio-demographic differences become relevant in a specific productive context only in as far as they either contribute to or hamper the organization of work and the attainment of organizational goals. Only these 'relevant' differences are constructed by management as 'diversity' and are actively managed. Our conceptualization of diversity places diversity within the relations of production, examining how the productive logic and the corresponding power relations between management and employees determine the salience, the value, and the management of specific differences.

We develop this critical theoretical perspective through four explorative case studies in the service sector, conducted in the frame of a qualitative research project on diversity management in Flanders. The project was conducted in the period 2001–2 on behalf of the Flemish government in Belgium. The five participating organizations were all known for their diverse workforce and diversity policy. The present analysis is limited to the four service companies in the sample,[1] given the importance of this sector for employment in Western economies.

The article follows an inductive logic and is organized in five sections. In the first section, we briefly review the diversity literature, addressing the main critiques to the socio-demographic approach to diversity, and position our study. We then describe our methodology, including the data collection and data analysis procedures. In the third section, we introduce our four

cases, describing how they organize work to provide specific services. We further analyse how in each organization diversity is understood as socio-demographic differences relevant to the provision of those services. In our fourth section, we analyse each organization's approach to diversity management and relate it to the specific nature of the provided service and the relative understanding of diversity. In the fifth section, we discuss the study's main findings in the light of additional theory and identify two dimensions of services that are relevant for the contextualized understanding of diversity and diversity management in organizations. Finally, we conclude with more explicitly critical theoretical reflections on the way different constellations of work/understanding of diversity/diversity management create different types of constraints and opportunities for employees to change existing organizational power relations.

The diversity literature: Current approaches and critiques

Diversity emerged as an autonomous research domain in the 1990s, following practitioners' growing interest in how to 'manage' an increasingly diverse demographic workforce (Nkomo & Cox, 1996). These managerial roots have left their print on the first generation of diversity studies as they generally investigate the effects of specific socio-demographic characteristics on work-related outcomes such as innovation, quality and problem solving (Milliken & Martins, 1996; Williams & O'Reilly, 1998) or on discriminatory practices such as the glass-ceiling, wage differences, segregation and exclusion from informal networks (Cox & Nkomo, 1990; Ibarra, 1995). These studies are instrumental in the sense that they aim to provide evidence for the 'business case' of diversity or, from a more ethically informed view, for discrimination in the workplace.

Recently, some diversity scholars have started to question these 'instrumental' research approaches, and particularly their underlying assumptions about the nature of diversity and their implications for how diversity should be managed. A major critique is that socio-demographic characteristics are considered constitutive of human beings' essences, leading to a view of identity as a given, fixed essence (Litvin, 1997). The assumption is that the socio-demographic category under investigation – such as gender or race – reflects essential differences in attitude, personality and behaviour. A second, related comment is that diversity remains primarily constructed as a group phenomenon (Litvin, 1997). Individuals are reduced to being members of a particular socio-demographic category such as 'women', 'the low-educated', or 'the migrant workers', with almost no attention to individual differences

or within-group variation (Adler & Graham, 1989; Litvin, 1997; Nkomo, 1995; Nkomo & Cox, 1996). Third, studies often focus on one particular socio-demographical category, neglecting the multiplicity of identities in the organizational context (e.g. Goodman, Phillips & Sackmann, 1999; Sackmann, 1997). Fourth, defining diversity in terms of socio-demographic differences obscures the role specific organizational contexts play in defining specific understandings of diversity (Ely, 1995; Foldy, 2002; Smircich, 1983). Overall, these reflections indicate the need for more theoretically driven research that goes beyond a simple examination of the effect of one socio-demographic characteristic on a particular outcome variable.

Addressing this need, diversity scholars have started to theorize the conditions under which diversity enhances or hinders the functioning of diverse organizations. For instance, Ely and Thomas (2001; Thomas & Ely, 1996) have identified three organizational perspectives on workforce diversity and examined how each affects the functioning of culturally diverse work groups: the integration-and-learning perspective, the access and-legitimacy perspective and the discrimination-and-fairness perspective. Other scholars have examined how time (Harrison et al., 1998) and organizational culture (Richard, Kochan & McMillan-Capehart, 2002) mediate the relationship between diversity and particular organizational outcomes. Although these studies increasingly acknowledge the complex, dynamic ways in which diversity operates in organizational settings, they still conceptualize diversity as one or a set of socio-demographic traits prior to the organization. For instance, Ely and Thomas (2001) take race as the starting point, and then examine how a group's perspective on workforce diversity intervenes between the socio-demographic composition of the same work group and its functioning, including the quality of intergroup relations and the degree to which members feel respected.

This study mainly addresses the first and fourth critiques by assuming that diversity is not a given essence and examining how it is produced and managed in specific organizational contexts. In order to do so, we relate organizations' specific understandings of diversity and approaches to its management to the different ways in which work is organized in these organizations. Our argument is that organizational understandings of diversity are centred solely on those socio-demographic differences that 'interfere' with work, either positively, by smoothing it, or negatively, by hampering it. Socio-demographic characteristics are therefore not relevant a priori, as employees' fixed essence, but rather become salient through their relation with work. In this perspective, diversity is always deeply embedded in the power-laden relations of production between management and employees.

While this perspective still considers diversity as a group phenomenon,

and focuses on a few identities, it does allow us to de-essentialize diversity and to understand it as a context-bound product, embedded in existing power relations and having an economic value. Differently from other studies, which either completely disregard power or explain unequal power relations solely in individual psychological terms or as effects of interpersonal dynamics (e.g. Ibarra, 1995; Mehra, Kilduff & Brass, 1998; Ragins & Scandura, 1994), we anchor diversity within the existing relations of production (Braverman, 1974; Burawoy, 1979). This perspective does not exclude that employees might construct themselves in other ways, and that identities are in general shifting and multiple (Nkomo & Cox, 1996). What it does is to grant, albeit provisionally, primacy to the relations of production deriving from the organization of work to illuminate how they constrain understandings of diversity and its management.

We operationalize our approach through two research questions: 1) How is a particular organizational understanding of diversity shaped by the specific organization of work? This question looks at diversity from a critical perspective, examining how management, from its privileged position, is able to impose a specific discourse of diversity anchored in a productive logic; and 2) How does a specific organizational understanding of diversity, anchored in a specific organization of work, shape an organization's approach to diversity management?

We address these research questions through four case studies of service companies. To date, the diversity literature has not paid particular attention to the service sector. In a more general vein, practitioners' texts often argue that organizations should recruit and manage diverse personnel to face the increased diversity among customers (Cox, 1991; Cox & Blake, 1991), a claim that Thomas and Ely (1996) have labelled 'the access-and-legitimacy perspective' on diversity. The assumption is that employees with a certain socio-demographic profile, for instance a particular cultural background or native language, bring skills and insights into the organization to better reach and serve customers with similar cultural and linguistic characteristics. However, this assumption has, to date, neither been properly theorized nor empirically tested.

Methodology

Data collection

To explore how a specific organization of service provision shapes a specific understanding of diversity and approach to diversity management, we analysed empirical material collected in four service organizations: a hospital

(Saint Mary's Hospital), a call centre (InterCommunications), a technical drawing company (TechnoLine), and a logistical company (GlobalTrans).[2] As mentioned, these four organizations were known for their diverse workforce and diversity policies. Within each organization, our contact person was first interviewed, mostly the HR or line manager responsible for diversity management. At the end of the interview, it was decided which employees to interview (see Table 1). In order to gain a picture as broad as possible of diversity and diversity practices in the organization, respondents having different socio-demographic characteristics and jobs at different hierarchical levels were selected. We also included employees that were considered knowledgeable about the organization's diversity policy. Complementary information was collected through internal documents on the composition of the workforce, turnover, and absenteeism.

The interviews took place at the workplace, lasted one to two hours, and were tape-recorded and fully transcribed. They were guided by a questionnaire of wide-ranging, open questions including topics such as the organization of work (What is your job? How is the work organized?); the organizational culture (How would you describe this company's culture? How are the relations between employees and managers? How are the relations among colleagues?); the employment of minority employees (Why does the company hire 'diverse' employees? What jobs do these employees do?); the practices of managing a diverse workforce (What is your HRM policy? What type of diversity related activities do you implement? How would you describe the relations among employees?); and personal reactions and feelings towards management and diversity practices (What is your experience of working in this company? What do you like here?).

Data analysis

We used an inductive, theory-generative analysis approach, relying on an iterative comparative process between theory and data (Eisenhardt, 1989), and coupling within-case analysis with between-case analysis (Eisenhardt, 1989; Yin, 1984). In a first step, each of the co-authors conducted a within-case analysis of the interview texts, including the socio-demographic composition of the labour force and its distribution within the organization, the core activities of the organization, the origins and rationale of diversity management, the organizational understanding of diversity, and the activities related to diversity. We re-constructed each case in detail and attempted to understand it as a coherent whole. In a second phase, we searched for cross-case patterns, comparing the identified topics across the four cases and identifying similarities and differences. Whenever differences in interpretation arose, we

Table I   Interviews in four service organizations

Interviews	Gender	Ethnicity	(Dis)Ability	Function
Saint Mary's Hospital				
Interview 1 (twice)	Female	Belgium		HR manager
Interview 2	Male	Syria/Belgium		Gynaecologist
Interview 3	Female	Belgium		Head of cleaning
Interview 4	Male	Belgium		Trainer of health assistants
Interview 5	Female	Belgium		Coach of low-educated employees
Interview 6	Female	Belgium		Head of nursing
Interview 7	Female	Belgium	Psychiatric patient	Cleaning staff
Interview 8	Male	Belgium		Nursing staff
Interview 9	Female	Morocco		Administrative staff
Interview 10	Female	Belgium		Midwife
Interview 11	Female	Morocco		Midwife
Interview 12	Male	Belgium		Ombudsperson
Interview 13	Female	Belgium		Head of nursing
Interview 14	Male	Hong Kong		Cook
InterCommunications				
Interview 1	Female	Belgium		CEO
Interview 2	Male	Senegal		Operator
Interview 3	Female	Morocco/ Belgium		Operator
Interview 4	Male	Belgium		Operator
Interview 5	Male	Belgium		Manager
Interview 6	Female	Belgium		Supervisor
Interview 7	Female	Morocco/ Belgium		Supervisor
Interview 8	Male	Belgium		Manager
TechnoLine				
Interview 1	Male	Belgium		Manager
Interview 2	Female	Belgium		Drawer
Interview 3	Female	Belgium		Drawer
Interview 4	Male	Belgium	Disabled	Drawer
Interview 5	Male	Belgium	Disabled	Drawer
Interview 6	Male	Belgium		Drawer
Interview 7	Male	Belgium	Disabled	Drawer
Interview 8	Male	Turkey	Disabled	Drawer
Interview 9	Female	Belgium		Management staff
Interview 10	Female	Belgium		Manager
GlobalTrans				
Interview 1 (twice)	Female	Belgium		HR manager
Interview 2	Male	Belgium		Quality manager

Table 1 Continued

Interviews	Gender	Ethnicity	(Dis)Ability	Function
Interview 3	Male	Turkey		Administrative staff
Interview 4	Female	Belgium		Team leader
Interview 5	Male	Belgium		Account supervisor
Interview 6	Male	Ghana		Operator
Interview 7	Female	Bosnia-Herzegovina		Inspector
Interview 8	Female	Bosnia-Herzegovina		Operator
Interview 9	Female	Belgium		Team leader
Interview 10	Male	Belgium		Logistical service manager
Interview 11	Male	Belgium		Account manager
Interview 12	Male	Belgium		Office manager of temporary work agency
Interview 13	Female	Belgium		Administrative staff

went back to the original interview texts and the complementary data sources to decide on the most appropriate interpretation. In this cross-case analysis, we identified two dimensions of services which appeared to affect the meaning of diversity and diversity management in each organization. After linking these dimensions to existing theory, we turned back to each case and conducted a second within-case analysis to understand how these dimensions operated in each specific organizational context.

Contextualized understandings of diversity

In this section, we address our first research question, examining how an organization's particular understanding of diversity is shaped by the specific organization of the service. We first conduct within-case analyses, discussing each company's specific meaning of diversity, and then conclude by comparing across the cases how diversity is differently understood.

Saint Mary's hospital

Saint Mary's hospital is a medium-sized hospital located in a central urban area with large Chassidic Jewish, Turkish and North African communities. Next to Flemish patients, the hospital has been serving the Jewish community since its origins in 1874 and increasingly, in the last 10 years, the Turkish

and North African ones. As a consequence of the cultural diversification of patients, the hospital staff has increasingly been confronted with culture-specific rules about close contact between individuals of different genders, bodily practices of birth-giving and food habits, as well as patients' need to communicate in their own native-language. The head of nursing reports his personal experience about this learning process:

> A man cannot take care of a Jewish woman, that's sure. When I was doing my internship, I didn't know, so they showed me the door . . . more than once. It has to do with their religion. With Moroccans, it rather has to do with the man/woman relationship. A man cannot take care of a woman, sometimes even a girl older than 10 or in her puberty. Not always, it has to do with how strict they are, how Westernized. . . . If a woman wants to give birth crouched, then we say to the gynaecologist: 'Sorry, but you'll have to go on your knees.' And most of them do.
>
> (Head of nursing)

The excerpt illustrates two key features of hospital staff's work. First, medical and paramedical hospital work involves sustained interaction, communication, and responsiveness to patients in situations of physical closeness and even intimacy. Second, the specific cultural significance of the body and its condition in birth, illness, and death (Scheper-Hughes & Locke, 1987) means that the appropriateness of the modalities in which care is provided is highly culturally scripted. This appears to be recognized within the hospital context, where specific demands of patients with different cultural backgrounds are considered 'legitimate' because they are seen as culturally produced (rather than as individual). Such acknowledgement, however, entails delivering the care service in different – culturally appropriate – modalities and therefore affects the nature of the hospital work, broadening the staff's necessary social competences.

As a response to the increasing demand for culturally appropriate patients' care, Saint Mary's hospital started in the early 1990s to hire employees with culturally diverse backgrounds. At the time of the study, it employed 37 (5.2 %) persons with a different cultural background, 5 men and 32 women. They held positions as a doctor (1), nurses and obstetricians (18), laboratory staff (1), logistical assistants (9), administrative staff (2), and support staff (6). These employees are particularly valuable at Saint Mary's hospital because their cultural, linguistic and/or religious differences match those of the patients. Through their cultural and linguistic knowledge, they assist in providing culturally appropriate services and act as translators

when the patients do not speak Dutch. They are brought into the organization in virtue of their 'competences' as members of specific communities. In the hospital, diversity is therefore understood as the collective cultural, linguistic and/or religious differences pertaining to clearly identifiable communities present in the hospital's surrounding environment. These communities cross the organizational boundaries as their members are both found among employees and patients.

InterCommunications

InterCommunications is a call centre founded in 1998. It grew out of a business centre set up a by socio-economic development project to stimulate the revival of a rather underprivileged area with high unemployment. The call centre offers consultancy in marketing activities such as telemarketing and telephone market research in a variety of European languages including Dutch, French, English, German, Italian, Portuguese, Spanish, Rumanian, and Polish. In the four years between its foundation and our study, the company had grown from 20 to 60 permanent employees including 51 operators, three supervisors, and six support staff and management. Operators' language skills represent a crucial asset for providing multilingual services to international customers:

> Sometimes there are errors in the database and I get a French-speaking person on the line. Then I just say: '*excusez-moi, je vais vous passer mon collègue francophone*'. Then I transfer the person to the French-speaking operator in the room. Sometimes I just switch to the other language. You are not expected to speak English or French, but if you do, the better. I am also fluent in Polish, so, if I get somebody on the line and I hear that his native language is Polish, and then I switch to Polish. Then you get a good evaluation of course.
>
> (Operator)

The importance of languages for InterCommunications' business leads to a particularly heterogeneous staff, with a majority being immigrants from various countries. At the same time, the company has a social mission to employ persons with few chances on the labour market. In line with this mission, when selecting among people with similar language skills, priority is given to individuals in disadvantaged positions such as single mothers, political refugees, older unskilled people, and disfigured or considerably overweight people. This policy, in turn, contributes to business objectives as operators are extra motivated not to ruin this work opportunity. This double

business-social policy is to a certain extent made possible by the virtual nature of communication by phone, keeping the organization and its employees invisible to customers. As customers only have access to employees' voice, rather than their whole attire, management is in a position to hire all kinds of people, including persons that would not be suitable for other first-line jobs involving closer contact with customers because of the way they look. In sum, at InterCommunications, diversity is defined on an individual basis and includes both linguistic diversity and other socio-demographic differences which render employees particularly vulnerable on the labour market. While the former represents an immediately usable skill, the latter motivates employees to work hard in order to make the best of the work opportunity they have received.

TechnoLine

Started in 1991, TechnoLine is a young engineering company with various branches in Belgium. It offers services for the design and set up of machines and industrial installations such as automatization, product development, and CAD consultancy. Due to a deficit of qualified technical drawers in the late 1990s, the company decided to broaden its recruitment pool by hiring drawers that were formerly unemployed and had received technical training by a public employment agency. Most of them were from socio-demographic groups that have historically been underrepresented in qualified technical professions, such as women, the physically disabled, the lower educated, and people with a non-Belgian cultural background.

As TechnoLine sells technical solutions for clients' unique problems, rather than standardized services, employees generally work at clients' sites, sometimes for several months. Due to the tailored nature of the services and the prolonged contact drawers have with clients, TechnoLine always informs the client at the start of a new project about the specific situation of the individual drawer, so that alternative work arrangements can be agreed whenever necessary:

> Before we send an employee to a client, we clearly say to the client: this person . . . this and that. We had somebody who had undergone an amputation and missed half of one leg. He had to go to a factory to take some measurements, which meant going up ladders. Then we said to the client: that person cannot do it, but he is a good drawer. In the end, they decided to take him. But then they know in advance what the limitations are.
>
> (Manager)

Differently from the first two cases, at TechnoLine diversity is understood as a set of individual socio-demographic differences that constrain the way some technical drawers can provide the service to the client. These constraints particularly limit drawers' flexibility. For instance, a physically disabled drawer is less mobile, some female drawers prefer to work part-time, and a Muslim drawer works during the night instead of the day during Ramadan. When negotiating practical solutions with clients, TechnoLine management stresses the quality of drawers' technical skills and their motivation. These latter competences are portrayed as assets overcoming employees' 'negative' diversity.

GlobalTrans

GlobalTrans, our last case study, positions itself as a business partner for international companies that outsource logistical operations. It focuses on distribution services of high-tech and consumer products throughout Europe. In profiling itself towards customers, the company stresses its flexibility. This includes, for instance, making new deliveries as fast as scheduled ones and guaranteeing a minimum working hours' availability for overseas customers located in different time zones. To be flexible, in addition to its permanent staff, the company employs 30 to 170 temporary storehouse workers in peak periods. Moreover, according to needs, it out-sources activities to a sheltered workplace, employing an average of 100 slightly mentally disabled persons. Temporary workers mostly carry out de-skilled, routine jobs like packaging and ticketing.

Due to GlobalTrans' growth in the last years, the company's permanent personnel increased from 192 to 252. Most of the newly hired employees started on a temporary contract and were permanently hired after good performance evaluations. Because of labour shortage during the time of growth, the majority of them were lower educated, migrant workers, often female. The following quote from GlobalTrans' HR manager portrays well the company's perspective on diversity:

> We had to hire diverse personnel, but we also have to hold onto our own strengths, our identity and our flexibility. Whether this happens with white employees or with foreigners, it doesn't matter. If you streamline the processes, if you introduce better quality control, certain jobs can be done by less qualified workers, if they stick to the rules.
>
> (HR manager)

Differently from the three previous cases, in this company culture, as well as other socio-demographic differences, remains in the background, while the company's own identity and its business goals are stressed. All employees are expected to perform their work in the same highly streamlined manner. Permanent work contracts are granted to temporary employees mainly on the basis of their performance and potential to work autonomously and take initiative. These latter are important competences in the less conjuncture-bound jobs of order picking and controlling, which are only performed by permanent employees. Additional criteria for permanent employment are a basic knowledge of spoken Dutch, teamwork orientation, meeting quality standards, and behavioural norms such as showing up on time, respecting the smoking prohibition, not using cellular phones, and respect for materials. As employees' cultural, linguistic, educational and gender differences are not seen to impact the service delivery, diversity at GlobalTrans remains largely 'unacknowledged': employees have to meet general criteria for employment centred on flexible availability, compliance, and low cost. Nonetheless, such managerial perspective obscures the fact that minority employees are more likely to be flexible, compliant and cheap due to their weak position on the labour market. Their very limited employment chances as unskilled, migrant, female workers operate as a powerful motivator, without which the company could not provide services in the same manner and at the same price.

Summary

The comparison of the four cases under study clearly shows that diversity is understood in context-specific ways depending on how it relates to the organization of the service delivery in each organization. In Saint Mary's hospital and at InterCommunications, socio-demographic differences are valued because they represent competences which directly contribute to the service and diverse personnel are therefore brought in because of their difference. However, in the former case diversity is understood as 'collective cultural differences', while in the latter it is understood as 'a multitude of individual differences', among which language stands out.

In contrast, at TechnoLine and GlobalTrans, socio-demographic differences are either seen as hindrances or are considered negligible. In the technical drawing company, they limit the flexibility in the service production; diversity is thus defined as 'limited individual spatio-temporal flexibility'. In the logistical company, differences rather tend to remain 'unacknowledged', foreclosing a proper organizational understanding of

diversity. However, socio-demographic differences are relevant in that they motivate specific employees to meet the flexibility, compliance and cost criteria set by the employer.

Contextualized approaches to diversity management

Building upon the results of the previous section, we now attempt to explain how different understandings of diversity and the underlying nature of the service affect the way organizations manage diversity. Following the same structure, we first analyse diversity management practices in each organization. We then conclude by comparing across the four cases, indicating how diversity management is differently produced.

Saint Mary's hospital

Next to the recruitment of employees with different cultural backgrounds, Saint Mary's hospital implements explicit diversity initiatives to ensure culturally appropriate patients' care. A first type of initiative aims at accommodating culture-specific needs in the care. For instance, the hospital offers a wide selection of food, places patients with similar cultural backgrounds in the same room, and allows special treatment during religious holidays. A second type of initiative attempts to increase Flemish employees' cultural knowledge and sensitivity. The hospital started a multicultural workgroup to provide more information about patients' different cultures. Its activities include information sessions about rituals of birth and death in different cultures, intercultural communication trainings, visits to the Jewish and Turkish neighbourhoods, and a multicultural calendar with all religious holidays. A third type of initiative deals with rules and procedures, such as the inclusion of an anti-discrimination clause in the hospital's bylaw and the appointment of an ombudsperson who handles possible intercultural conflicts. Overall, diversity management in Saint Mary's hospital focuses on learning about the cultural differences of patients' particular cultural groups, addressing them, and solving possible culture-bound conflicts.

InterCommunications

At InterCommunications, management has a well thought through policy to manage its diverse workforce, based on a combination of soft HRM practices which they term 'employee care' and a strong organizational culture valuing employees' uniqueness. Employee care starts with the office lay-out

which, differently from most call centres, offers spaces for breaks and relaxation. It is further integrated in InterCommuncations' monitoring and evaluation approach. Newcomers are given a few days to adjust to the job and gain some competency before they are monitored. In evaluating employees, supervisors attempt to provide constructive feedback, emphasizing positive elements, and selecting only one aspect for improvement at a time. Also, the call centre adopts a flexible working hours policy in which employees' personal and family situation is taken into consideration when scheduling their working hours. Management restricts working hours to between 8 am and 8 pm on weekdays and Saturday mornings, in spite of some clients' demands for longer evening hours. Finally, management attempts to create an open, amiable atmosphere favouring positive personal and inter-group relations. By assigning both Dutch- and French-speaking employees to the same projects, it favours linguistic desegregation between these groups.[3] While official documents need to be in Dutch to comply with the Flemish language legislation, informal French translations are always provided. Moreover, management takes every opportunity to organize and finance social, intercultural events for personnel. Overall, the heterogeneous workforce at InterCommunications is managed through a policy based on caring relationships where individual differences are openly recognized and taken into account without, however, stigmatizing them.

TechnoLine

Management of TechnoLine maintains that it does not have an explicit diversity management policy and rather stresses that all employees are selected for their capabilities and motivation. However, as illustrated above, whenever a drawer's particular situation interferes with his or her work, ad hoc solutions are agreed with the client. For example, the company and the client decide together how to address the limited mobility of a physically disabled male drawer: he can carpool with colleagues to the client's site, is accompanied by a colleague when taking measurements involving climbing ladders, and carries out tasks at the drawing company's office rather than at the client's site whenever possible. Once these adjustments are agreed upon no additional special treatment is given, and the same expectations hold for all personnel. The centrality of the clients to TechnoLine's service activities is further reflected in their involvement in all HR activities. For instance, clients' demands drive the content and timing of training and development activities. They also provide input for employees' performance appraisals, the main ground on which salary increases are negotiated between each employee and his or her manager. While some employees appreciate the

existing evaluation and compensation practices, others mention their lack of negotiation skills or limited contact with clients, due to lack of mobility and flexibility, as causes for lagging behind in terms of salary. Overall, Techno-Line manages its diverse personnel through a meritocratic client-centred system allowing for some degree of flexibility in meeting individual employees' needs.

GlobalTrans

Similar to TechnoLine, GlobalTrans has no explicit diversity policy in place, but it does have general HRM practices which give attention to flexibility and a comfortable working environment. To compensate for the low salaries in the distribution industry, the company offers flexibility in terms of working hours and vacations depending on employees' personal situations. On very short notice, employees can adjust their working hours or take a day off. Further, management has taken several initiatives to create a positive working environment, fostering personal relationships and shortening the hierarchical distance between personnel. For instance, buildings have been renovated, sandwiches are sold at subsidized prices and, as in the call centre, social outside-work activities such as barbecues and soccer games are organized. Overall, GlobalTrans manages diversity through its general HR policy and activities stressing general standards for everybody, flexibility in individual working arrangements, and a positive work environment.

Summary

The comparison of the four cases under study clearly indicates that each organization has developed a context-specific approach to diversity management. However, the cases also present some similarities. In Saint Mary's hospital and at InterCommunications, socio-demographic differences among the workforce are considered an asset. They are therefore not only acknowledged but even stressed by the diversity policy. In the hospital, diversity is managed through specific initiatives aimed at increasing employees' awareness about the differences among cultural groups. In the call centre, on the contrary, the emphasis is on employees' individual differences, which are managed through soft HRM practices. In contrast, at TechnoLine and GlobalTrans, where differences are either seen as a potential problem or largely unacknowledged, diversity is managed through individual ad hoc solutions or general HRM activities.

At the same time, these organizations' approaches to diversity management appear to assign different roles to the customer/client/patient. In Saint

Mary's hospital and at TechnoLine, patients and clients are central to the management of diversity. While patients' cultural background determines the diversity practices at the hospital, the clients of the technical drawing company have an eminent role in the HR decisions regarding work organization, training, evaluation, promotion, and salary. In contrast, at InterCommunications and GlobalTrans diversity management appears to be internal to the organization. Although the former stresses employees' diversity and the latter does not, both emphasize the establishment of good interpersonal relationships, offer flexibility taking into account employees' personal situations, and organize social activities.

Discussion: Theorizing diversity (management) through services

Through a qualitative analysis of four organizations, this study has shown that diversity is not just a socio-demographic given. Rather, organizations produce their own understandings of diversity and manage diversity in ways that are in line with those understandings. Specifically, we found that diversity is understood in relation to the way particular socio-demographic differences affect the organization of the service delivery, and are therefore likely to contribute to or hamper the attainment of organizational goals. Each organization's approach to diversity management, including its policy and related practices, was based on this understanding of diversity and directed at ensuring that diversity could contribute to – or at least not hamper – the attainment of organizational goals.

Reflecting more in depth on cross-case patterns in our empirical findings, we inductively derived two dimensions of services work that appear to play a key role in shaping contextualized understandings of diversity and diversity management. The first dimension refers to the degree of customers' physical proximity in the service delivery. The second refers to whether the modalities of the service provision are defined solely in terms of general professional standards or also match the characteristics of specific groups of customers sharing the same socio-demographic characteristics.

Returning to our cases, we see that the hospital and the call centre serve patients and customers by providing 'diversity-customized' services. That is, their services need to meet not only general service delivery standards but also customers' culturally and linguistically differentiated demands. However, while in the hospital employees and patients are in close contact over a longer period of time, at the call centre clients remain distant and invisible during brief contacts. The technical drawing company and the logistical company
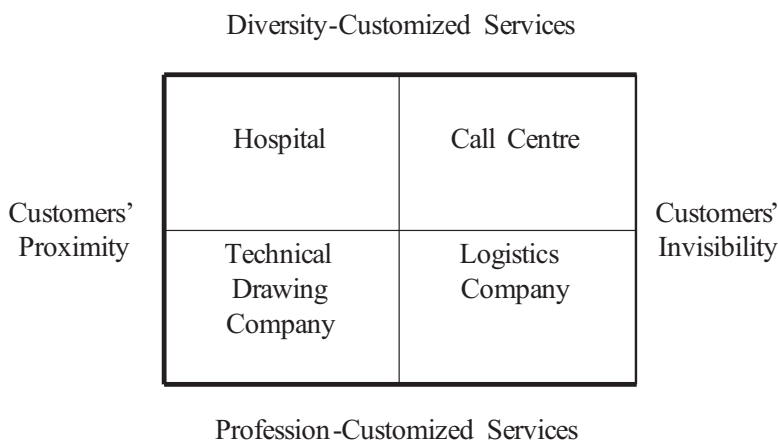
Diversity-Customized Services

Hospital	Call Centre
Technical Drawing Company	Logistics Company

Customers' Proximity (left)

Customers' Invisibility (right)

Profession-Customized Services

Figure I   Dimensions of the service processes in four organizations

provide 'profession-customized' services, that is, services that are tailored to clients' demands according to general professional standards such as quality, cost and flexibility. However, while in the technical drawing company clients are physically close to employees over longer periods of time, in the logistical company clients remain distant and invisible to employees. The intersection of these two dimensions producing a two-by-two matrix is presented in Figure 1. Before discussing the empirical findings in the light of these two dimensions, we relate them to existing theory in order to build further evidence for their theoretical relevance (Eisenhardt, 1989).

A theoretical background to the two service dimensions

There is an increasing body of organization studies literature pointing to the central role customers play in defining organizational processes. The more theoretically oriented studies argue that the customer has become an organizational insider defining 'the rules of the game' (du Gay, 1996; du Gay & Salaman, 1992). Typically, they conceptualize the customer in an abstract way as an 'organizing principle', a 'rationale' for new strategy, organizational structures and management accounting (Gutek & Welsh, 2000; Schneider & Bowen, 1995) and, from more critical perspectives, as a 'hegemonic managerial discourse' for employee subjugation (Knights & Morgan, 1993; Sturdy, Grugulis & Willmott, 2001). This type of literature supports our finding that customers are central in contemporary organizations' work processes. However, due to its broad, theoretical orientation, it does not

provide specific insights to understand employees' interactions with customers in service organizations. For such understanding, we need to look at other bodies of literature.

Indications of the importance of our first service dimension, customers' proximity versus invisibility, can be found in the growing number of empirical studies on 'emotional' and 'aesthetic' labour in service professions where employees and customers interact face-to-face (Hancock & Tyler, 2000; Hochschild, 1983; Höpfl, 2002; Pugh, 2001; Witz, Warhurst & Nickson, 2003). These studies generally elaborate on either the norms for appropriate verbal and non-verbal behaviour imposed by management or the verbal and non-verbal practices first-line employees use in order to maintain control over the service provision. In both cases, the physical proximity to the customer fundamentally constrains the way employees conduct their work. Some of these studies suggest that first-line employees' socio-demographic traits affect the service delivery because the core competences of a job can be modelled upon the socio-demographic traits of the employees who generally perform that job. For instance, various studies on flight assistants (Brewis & Sinclair, 2000; Hancock & Tyler, 2000; Höpfl, 2002; Tyler & Taylor, 1998) consistently indicate how 'beauty' and 'care', generally associated with femininity, shape both the organization's and customers' expectations of the modalities of the service provision.

A second body of literature, comparing computer-mediated with face-to-face communication, also tends to support the argument that proximity of customers constrains service provision. This research (e.g. Kiesler & Sproull, 1992, Tidwell & Walther, 2002; Walther, 1996) further suggests that computer-mediated communication is more egalitarian in nature. The absence of social context cues equalizes access and eliminates categorizing of speakers, allowing the different parties to participate more equally in the communication process (Kiesler & Sproull, 1992). In addition, the absence of nonverbal cues prevents the negative effects that occur when nonverbal behaviours are less positive than verbal ones (Walther, 1995). In mediated communication, information and meaning of messages are not distorted by negative nonverbal cues. Such findings suggest that customers and employees' mutual invisibility generally create a more equal relationship within the service provision. This might be particularly the case whenever the parties are socio-demographically dissimilar, as socio-demographic traits are generally related to visible cues and social status (Milliken & Martins, 1996).

Overall, both bodies of literature point to the powerful effects of customers' proximity versus invisibility on work practices, communication, control and interpersonal relationships. This service dimension shifts the attention from the socio-demographic traits of employees and customers to

the characteristics of their interaction. The diversity literature often assumes that employees' and customers' similar socio-demographic background will enhance identification between them and, in turn, positively affect the quality of the service. This service dimension qualifies such an assumption, suggesting that the effects of such (dis)similarity depend on the modalities of the service provision, and particularly on the parties' proximity versus invisibility.

In contrast to the first, our second service dimension – 'profession-customized services' versus 'diversity-customized services' – cannot be grounded onto an even broad body of research. The service literature mostly distinguishes between standardized versus customized services (Hart, 1995; Sundbo, 2002). As Sundbo (2002: 96–7) states, standardization is 'the situation where the service product is the same every time (like a McDonald's hamburger)', while customisation is 'the situation where the service product is created in the concrete situation as an individual solution to the customer's specific problem ("tailor made", as when a carpenter comes to your house to repair a window)'. The distinction conceptualizes the customer/client respectively as an undistinguishable member of a mass or as a unique individual. In contrast, we point here to a distinction between services that are tailored to fit clients' business needs defined by generally accepted professional standards, and services that are tailored to meet clients' specific demands associated with a socio-demographic trait. In this latter case, the service is not adapted to meet a customer's preferences as an individual but rather as a member of a specific socio-demographic group. In the cases under analysis, customers' cultural and linguistic differences legitimize further adaptations of the already rather 'customized' service of the hospital but also of the more 'standardized' service of the call centre.

Again, while the diversity literature assumes that particular consumer segments can be best accessed and served by employees with similar socio-demographic backgrounds (cf. Thomas & Ely's (1996) access-and-legitimacy perspective), it has yet to empirically investigate how this occurs. Specifically, it remains unclear which customers' socio-demographic differences, under which conditions, become 'salient' enough to legitimize the provision of a diversity-customized service.

Diversity through service dimensions

In this sub-section, we further interpret the findings of the four cases in the light of the two identified service dimensions, indicating how they shape each organization's specific understandings of diversity. Table 2 summarizes the discussion.

Table 2 Understandings of diversity in four service organizations

Diversity		The Hospital	The Call Centre	The Technical Drawing Company	The Logistics Company
Sociodemographic Differences		Migrant employees from same culture as patients	Migrants, political refugees, single, mothers, older unskilled people, disfigured and overweight people	Physically disabled, female and migrant drawers	Low-educated persons, often female migrants
Organizational Understanding of Diversity	Influence of diversity-customized versus profession-customized services	Cultural, linguistic and/or religious differences contribute to culturally appropriate care	Linguistic differences and motivation contribute to high-quality, multilingual service	Bodily, gender and cultural differences reduce flexibility and need to be compensated through technical skills and motivation	Cultural, linguistic, educational, and gender differences remain in the background (but imply flexible, compliant and cheap labour)
	Influence of customers' proximity versus invisibility	Close customer co-determines which diversity needs to enter the organization	Invisible customer leaves to the organization which diversity can enter the organization	Close customer co-determines the extent to which diversity is acceptable	Invisible customer leaves to the organization the extent to which diversity is acceptable

When the organization provides diversity-customized services, as in the hospital and the call centre, diverse personnel's cultural and linguistic skills originating in their diverse backgrounds are considered a valuable asset to provide appropriate services to diverse customers. Employees are hired *in virtue of* their difference, which is at the core of the service. In contrast, when the organization provides profession-customized services, as in the technical drawing and logistical company, employees are expected to perform according to their technical skills, motivation, cost and compliance. Their particular socio-demographic characteristics have no additional value and remain in the background as long as they do not hinder the service provision. If their differences turn out to be an obstacle, however, they need to be compensated through superior technical skills, lower cost, higher compliance, and/or stronger motivation. In these cases, employees are hired *in spite of* their difference.

The customers' proximity versus invisibility dimension determines how far the customer constrains the types and degree of diversity that can be brought into the organization. When customers are physically close, they represent a major constraint. In the case of the hospital, the customer co-determines which differences are desirable – e.g. personnel need to have the same cultural background as patients. In the technical drawing agency, the customer co-determines the acceptable degree of those differences that can potentially hamper the service. When customers (and, conversely, employees) are invisible, the organization can decide more autonomously what types and degrees of differences are brought in. In the case of the call centre, the organization can hire employees who are disfigured or overweight as the distant customer cannot impose aesthetic criteria. In the logistical company, management autonomously decides what degree of difference is acceptable: migrant low-educated women are welcome as long as they are flexible and compliant workers.

Diversity management through service dimensions

The characteristics of the services and the related understandings of diversity shape in turn the way organizations manage diversity. These different policy approaches are reported in Table 3.

When the organization provides diversity-customized services, personnel's socio-demographic differences are not only acknowledged but also actively managed. In the hospital, management implements very explicit diversity-related initiatives such as recruiting personnel with different cultural backgrounds and cultural awareness-raising for employees. In the

Table 3 Approaches to diversity management in four service organizations

Diversity Management		The Hospital	The Call Centre	The Technical Drawing Company	The Logistics Company
Practices and Policies		Explicit diversity practices towards recruitment of diverse personnel and increasing cultural sensitivity	'Soft' HRM, strong organizational culture, individualized flexibility practices, open work spaces	Traditional meritocracy centred around clients' evaluations, solutions to individual problems are negotiated	Traditional HRM with attention to individual working hours' flexibility and work environment
Organizational Approach to Diversity Management	Influence of diversity-customized versus profession-customized services	Specific cultural and linguistic group differences are stressed	Individual differences are acknowledged and celebrated	The same standards apply to all employees but individual differences are addressed ad hoc	The same standards apply to all employees but there is flexibility in individual work arrangements
	Influence of customers' proximity versus invisibility	External orientation: close, diverse patients strongly influence the content of the internal diversity policy	Internal orientation: invisible customer allows a focus on strong organizational identity that counterbalances all individual differences	External orientation: close customers strongly influence decisions concerning work organization, promotion and salary	Internal orientation: invisible customer allows a focus on HR management and internal relationships

call centre, soft HRM practices address employees' individual differences, while the organizational culture ensures that differences are valued. These two perspectives are, however, not completely alike: the hospital approaches differences as well-defined sets of characteristics and rules of specific groups, while the call centre sees differences as individual and open-ended. This is doubtless related to the presence, in the hospital, of patients and employees that are conceived in the first place as members of specific cultural communities. In the call centre, the focus is rather on the employees themselves, each with an often difficult and always unique personal story, while customers remain distant and impersonal (Walther, 1996). Such customers can hardly be considered as communities affecting the way difference is thought of and dealt with. The stress on the individual rather than on groups allows building a strong organizational culture and a shared organizational identity despite diversity among staff.

In contrast, when the organization provides profession-customized services, differences are either not acknowledged or are acknowledged only so in as far as they hamper the service provision. Management relies on general HRM activities, applicable to all employees. In the technical drawing company such HRM is a meritocracy complemented by ad hoc solutions to accommodate individual differences, while in the logistical company services processes are highly streamlined and complemented by a flexibility policy addressing individual needs.

The degree of customers' proximity affects diversity management by orienting it outwards or inwards. When customers are physically co-present, management practices are integrated within the company's customer relations' strategy, taking an external, customer-centred orientation. In the hospital, the embodied interaction, reinforced by the diversity-customized service, makes the customer the central actor in defining which cultural and linguistic differences need to be acquired through recruitment and training. In the technical drawing company, where the client is close over long periods, clients are central in the organization's diversity management through their prominent role in HRM decisions regarding training, work organization, promotion and salary. In contrast, when customers are distant and invisible, the organization's diversity approach takes an internal orientation. Common to the call centre and the logistical company is their emphasis on establishing good interpersonal relationships, offering personal flexibility, and organizing social activities for staff. Because differences play opposite roles in the delivered service, however, the two approaches are not completely alike. In the call centre, where differences contribute to the service, they are valued and celebrated through intercultural activities. In the logistical company, where differences remain in the background, the

stress is on equal rules and personnel are invited to typically 'Belgian' social activities.

Summary

The two service dimensions of customers' proximity versus invisibility and profession-customized versus diversity-customized service provide a useful analytical framework to better conceptualize the context-specific ways in which diversity is understood and managed in organizations. The discussion points to a clear link between the organization of the service provision, understanding of diversity, and approach to diversity management within each organization. Attempting to reflect the 'gist of diversity' in each organization through a label, we would say that diversity is above all 'marketable' in Saint Mary's hospital, 'valuable' at InterCommunications, 'negotiable' at TechnoLine, and 'affordable' at GlobalTrans.

Conclusion: critical reflections

From a more critical perspective, we reflect in this concluding section on how specific understandings of diversity and diversity management open up or constrain diverse personnel's opportunities to challenge power relations in the organization. Traditionally, the diversity literature has disregarded power relations or explained them in individual or interpersonal terms. Our theoretical perspective instead embeds diversity within the power-laden relations of production between management and employees. By relating diversity (management) to the specific organization of service provision, we could show that diversity becomes an organizational issue in as far as it is a source of value (or of negative value). This 'economic' conceptualization of diversity places diversity within the relations of production and the related power relations between management and employees (Braverman, 1974; Burawoy, 1979). It enables us to illuminate the link between 'relevant' socio-demographic differences and employees' ability to work, contributing to profit-making.

However, the limitation of such economic conceptualization of diversity is that, by stressing the underlying economic material structure, it underplays the role that employees play in shaping power relations in the organization. Even if theoretical primacy is given to the organization of work, employees remain agents, able to make a difference (Giddens, 1984) to the existing power relations they are embedded in. We reflect here on how particular constellations of work/understandings of diversity/diversity

management create and constrain possibilities of (antagonistic) agency for employees, even from their disadvantaged positions on the labour market and, often, in the organizational hierarchy.

From this qualitative study, we suggest that the space employees have to question power relations within the organization is shaped by the degree to which the features of the two service dimensions converge. We hold that in 'strong' approaches to diversity (management), the service features reinforce each other, limiting employees' space for agency, resistance and (micro-) emancipation (Alvesson & Willmott, 2002). In 'mixed' approaches to diversity (management), on the other hand, the only partially overlapping service features allow more space for agency, resistance and (micro-) emancipation.

The hospital's approach to diversity is a strong 'monolithic' approach stressing difference. In this context, cultural differences are at the core of diversity (management), where cultures tend to be understood as well-bounded sets of normative prescriptions that have to be followed in order to provide appropriate health care. These prescriptions lead to a definition of diverse personnel as members of a specific cultural group and to the need, for Belgian personnel, to acquire specific cultural skills to meet the diverse patients' needs. Although the strong, instrumental 'business logic' of this diversity approach opens up possibilities of employment for diverse personnel and training for Belgian ones, it also leads to a very normative, 'over-determined' diversity (management), constraining what type of diversity is allowed into the organization and foreclosing possibilities for personnel's resistance.

The logistical company's approach is as strong and coherent as the hospital's but stresses sameness rather than difference (cf. Liff & Wajcman, 1996). Here, differences do not represent a source of value to the service process, cannot be portrayed as skills, and therefore remain largely unacknowledged. At the same time, customers' invisibility and distance entail that customers cannot be used to negotiate better employment conditions. The result it that diversity is 'under-determined' and appears to be subsumed within 'classic' power relations between management and employees. As minority employees are generally in particularly vulnerable positions in organizations and on the labour market in general, their possibility of resistance and emancipation remains limited.

More 'mixed' approaches to diversity (management) can be found in the call centre and the technical drawing agency. In the call centre, the combination of personnel's valuable linguistic skills and customers' invisibility poses relatively few constrains on the organization, which can both stress difference as an 'existential' condition and promote a counterbalancing sense of sameness through a shared organizational identity. Although terms of employment remain constrained by the market and, similarly to other call centres,

technology enables close surveillance, this 'open' approach appears to allow employees' active participation in the organization on their own terms and the development of a sense of own worth and self-confidence in their job. In other words, the organization offers more space for employees' non-antagonistic forms of agency, which might lead to forms of micro-emancipation.

In the technical drawing agency, the combination of profession-customized service and customers' closeness creates a rather different picture. While differences form (potential) problems as they constrain employees' flexibility, the involvement of clients in finding ad hoc solutions makes differences negotiable and therefore more acceptable for all stakeholders. The inclusion of clients in all negotiations between employer and employee on major HRM decisions opens up room for employees' agency, creating possibilities for resistance and micro-emancipation (Rosenthal, Peccei & Hill, 2001).

To conclude, the proposed theoretical perspective has pointed to the potential of linking diversity to the organization of work in order to explain the variety of diversity (policies) that organizations adopt. Future diversity studies may benefit from building onto this theoretical insight, which embeds diversity in the relations of production to explain why particular differences become salient and are valued or devalued. Further developing this perspective, future research may address the theoretical and methodological limitations of our study. Because we anchored diversity in the productive logic and the underlying power relations, our analysis focused on organizational structure neglecting minority employees' agency. Our analysis reveals the ways in which employees are constructed and their actions constrained, but fails to investigate how employees, as agents, overcome constrains, grab opportunities, and manage their differences, actively contributing to the formation of organizational understandings of diversity and approaches to diversity management. Integrating agency into the analysis would allow examining how diversity (management) operates as an identity-regulation mechanism (Alvesson & Willmott, 2002), and therefore better illuminate its multidimensional nature.

Addressing this theoretical limitation would also require a more thorough methodological approach than the one used in this explorative study. Our empirical data is mainly based on a limited sample of interviews, in four organizations. A longitudinal, ethnographic research design, including a larger and more representative sample of respondents, in a larger number of organizations would be needed to further test and refine our theoretical insights. Such enhanced theoretical and methodological perspective would do more justice to the dynamic, contested nature of diversity, and the power relations in which it is embedded, addressing additional shortcomings of the current diversity literature and further contributing to its advancement.

Acknowledgements

Notes

1   The fifth organization was excluded as it is a manufacturing company.
2   All proper names used in the article are pseudonyms.
3   Belgium has three official languages: Dutch, French, and German.

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