Challenging the cross-national transfer of diversity management in MNCs: Exploring the 'identity effects' of diversity discourses

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Abstract
I develop a critique of the cross-national transfer of diversity management in multinational companies. Adopting a critical approach to diversity management, and considering diversity as a discourse, I examine how and why employees in an overseas subsidiary challenged the diversity practices transferred by their foreign parent company. Drawing on a case study of a Sri Lankan knowledge work firm that was in the process of implementing its Western parent company's Diversity Management agenda, which they had had little input in shaping, I highlight how challenge is triggered by a desire to reject unfavourable subject positions attributed to individuals in transferred discourses of diversity and to reposition the self more favourably. My contribution involves showing how dynamic power relations between parents and subsidiaries shape the global transfer of diversity across MNCs, depicting subsidiary employees as agentic subjects as opposed to passive recipients.

Introduction

In this article, I develop a critique of the cross-national transfer of diversity management in multinational companies. I do so by adopting a critical approach to diversity management and considering diversity as a discourse to examine how and why employees in an

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overseas subsidiary challenged diversity practices transferred by their foreign parent company. Defined as a management philosophy that recognises and values heterogeneity in organisations with a view to realising business benefits (Leslie, 2019), diversity management is widely adopted by organisations around the world. Many multinational organisations (MNCs) attempt to transfer their diversity agendas to overseas subsidiaries (Meriläinen et al., 2009); however, the cross-national transfer of diversity management is seen as being constrained by 'cultural differences', and it has been stressed that MNCs must adjust their diversity practices to match the local realities of the regions in which they operate (Lauring, 2013; Özbilgin et al., 2012). Although providing many useful insights into the challenges involved in implementing diversity agendas in a global context, the cross-cultural literature focuses mainly on normalising 'cultural differences' in a relatively unproblematic manner, downplaying crucial power differentials between Western parent firms and non-Western subsidiaries, which may shape the way employees of subsidiaries experience and respond to transferred diversity agendas.

Although having the potential to contribute towards positive social transformation (Bruna et al., 2017), diversity can also operate as a power-laden discourse (Ahonen et al., 2014) that conceals or 'smooths over' significant inequalities in work settings and maintains the status quo (Bell and Hartmann, 2007; Kalonaityte, 2010). Emerging critical literature provides insights into how diversity discourses are mobilised within organisations to position recipients of diversity agendas as 'inferior' (Romain et al., 2019) and legitimise the employment positions and practices of implementers (Zanoni and Janssens, 2015). As far as the cross-national transfer of diversity management is concerned, the discourse of 'cultural differences' between West and non-West is underpinned by a socially constructed binary between developed, modern and superior Western organisations and their historically disadvantaged and inferior non-Western counterparts (Jack, 2015; Prasad, 2006). In other words, the implication is that subsidiaries and their employees are backward and intellectually lacking (in comparison to Western parent firms), and failures to implement transferred practices across MNCs are often explained in terms of an inability and/or 'lack' on the part of the subsidiaries (Frenkel, 2008). Although the cross-cultural literature provides useful insights into how control is exercised by parent companies and how subsidiaries attempt to adapt to 'Western' models of diversity (Hennekam et al., 2017), little is known about how employees of subsidiaries respond as agents to the subject positions attributed to them in parent companies' discourses of diversity.

This article addresses this important conceptual and empirical lacuna through a case study of a globalised knowledge work organisation in Sri Lanka that is affiliated with a parent company based in Western Europe. At the time of data collection, this subsidiary was in the process of implementing the Diversity Management agenda of its Western parent company – one it had little input in shaping. In this article, I focus on understanding how and why employees of subsidiaries challenge discourses of diversity transferred by the foreign parent companies. I will first review the relevant literature, and then outline my research design and explain the research context. My findings offer insights into how diversity discourses transferred by a parent company positioned subsidiary employees in unfavourable ways, and how these parties entered the negotiating space in order to challenge the positions attributed to them. My contribution involves showing how

dynamic power relations between parents and subsidiaries shape the global transfer of diversity across MNCs, depicting subsidiary employees as agentic subjects as opposed to passive recipients. I conclude by outlining the implications for practice.

Diversity management: The story so far

The literature on diversity management is characterised by a polarisation between mainstream and critical approaches. Mainstream approaches consider socio-categorical dimensions such as gender, ethnicity, age and culture to be stable, objective and unambiguous categories that transcend time and place (Tatli and Özbilgin, 2012). Critical approaches conceptualise diversity as a socially constructed phenomenon that is understood in distinct ways by various actors, characterised by dilemmas and conflict and influenced by competing political interests (Zanoni and Janssens, 2015). In this article, I integrate the critical and cross-cultural literature on diversity management with the literature on discursive positioning to address five themes that are important to understand how and why employees of subsidiaries challenge diversity practices transferred from foreign parent companies.

Diversity as a discourse

Diversity as a discourse refers to socially constructed ideas about *differences between people* that may combine to produce 'particular versions of events' (Burr, 2003) that vary across social contexts. Emerging critical literature offers insights into how the microdynamics of language shapes the way differences among people are represented and understood in organisations (Swan, 2009). Critical scholars illustrate the various cases for diversity (such as the business case or the social justice case) as arguments that can be compatible in certain contexts (Tomlinson and Schwabenland, 2010) and conflicting in others (Perriton, 2009). Drawing on phantasmagoria as a metaphor, Schwabenland and Tomlinson (2015) represent diversity as a 'gothic tale' that is difficult to concretise and visualise.

Diversity, positioning and identity

Discourses of diversity are often characterised by 'essentialist divisions' that present differences among people as natural and obvious (Lorbiecki and Jack, 2000). As individuals are represented as 'exemplars of particular demographic categories' (Litvin, 1997: 204), stereotypical understandings associated with particular categories of diversity (gender, for example) may be attributed to people who are seen as belonging to particular categories (Ainsworth and Hardy, 2004). These understandings may conflict with how people understand themselves, leading to a discrepancy between experienced and attributed identity (Villesèche et al., 2018). For example, scholars have discussed how women distance themselves from gender-based diversity initiatives because they do not want to be seen as needing help, in line with negative stereotypes associated with their gender category (Leslie, 2019). A discursive positioning perspective (Van Langenhove and Harré, 1999) is useful in order to understand how

individuals may implicitly or explicitly position their own and others' identities in their daily discussions on diversity (Zanoni and Janssens, 2015). 'Who one is' is therefore continuously negotiated (Davies and Harré, 2007), and dependent on the positions that are made available within one's own discursive practices and those of others. Positions can be offered or challenged, and altered and appropriated in discourse (Harré et al., 2009).

Diversity, discourse and power

Actors' ability to offer, modify or reinforce positions in discourse is influenced by the power relations that characterise a particular context (Hardy and Phillips, 2004: 299). Traditionally defined as an asymmetrical relation (Dahl, 1957) that rests upon the ability to influence others (Lukes, 1974), power is seen as a fundamental organising feature of any society and any social relation (Zanoni et al., 2010). Although it is understood as originating from social structures and ideologies (Ahonen et al., 2014), power is not fixed or static, but is continuously negotiated and reproduced as people engage with each other. Power can be exercised through discourses of diversity, as what or who is considered to be legitimate, superior and/or inferior in a particular context, and what is unrecognised and concealed from the public, is accomplished through language (Meriläinen et al., 2009).

In a study of a Swedish school for adults, Kalonaityte (2010) shows how organisational discourses of diversity construct 'privileged' and 'disadvantaged' ethnic identities, maintaining the social hierarchy between Swedes and immigrants. In another Swedish study, Romain et al. (2019) highlight how human resource management professionals construct recipients of diversity agendas as inferior and in need of help. This positioning not only compromises employees' individuality and their agency, but also serves to reproduce existing power relations. Zanoni and Janssens (2015) show how leaders use diversity as a symbolic tool in order to legitimise their own occupational positions and practices, constructing employees as compliant workers who are used to achieve specific organisational ends. These studies illustrate not only how the interests of the senior managers and HR personnel who design and execute diversity management agendas (agents) can differ from those of the individuals who receive these agendas (principles) (Wiseman et al., 2012), but also how diversity management can operate in ways that undermine its 'emancipatory potential' (Baehr and Gordon, 2018). Given that the reproduction of power requires justification, powerful groups must convince others that they deserve to occupy privileged positions. This may involve them representing their own group in a positive light and others in a negative light, while simultaneously highlighting their desire to help negatively represented groups (Van Dijk, 2006). Diversity research also provides insights into how significant workplace inequalities are concealed or neutralised in organisational discourses of diversity. For example, Rodriguez and Freeman (2016) show how diversity discourses often soften and smooth over racism in higher education by presenting it as an experience that is common to both whites and people of colour. Bell and Hartmann (2007) highlight how the 'happy talk' of diversity can downplay many problems related to race and avoid addressing persistent structural inequalities in work settings (see also Ahmed, 2012).

Diversity and agency

Existing diversity scholarship has largely tended to overlook the question of agency, although scholars have recognised that there is space for ordinary employees to engage in self-interested action. In a notable study of a technical drawing company and a hospital, Zanoni and Janssens (2007) show how employees reflect on and respond to forms of discursive control agentically, albeit in somewhat compliant ways, and create spaces for micro-emancipation through compliance. Subject positions offered through discourse can be challenged (Harré and Van Langenhove, 1999), although the critical literature on diversity has been slow to address processes of contestation and resistance. Because actors are embedded in multiple contradictory discourses, they are provided with space for resisting and engaging in self-interested action (Ainsworth and Hardy, 2004). Actors must, however, compete with other actors in order to advance favourable meanings (Chouliaraki and Fairclough, 1999).

Diversity in MNCs

MNCs around the world are increasingly transferring diversity practices across national boundaries (Hennekam et al., 2017). From a postcolonial view that illuminates how Western modernity is inextricably linked to patterns of colonial and neo-colonial domination (Prasad, 2006), 'ideal' forms of knowledge and practices promoted by MNCs in their overseas subsidiaries reflect the key ideas and values of the West (Frenkel, 2008). Postcolonial theory is wide and varied, but one underlying theme is that the colonial encounter continues to have a significant impact on people's lives in the West and non-West that is manifested in a belief in European cultural dominance (Jack, 2015) and representations of Europe and the West as morally and intellectually superior to the 'inferior' non-West (Kalonaityte, 2010). When a subject is positioned as superior, it is given a moral obligation to 'help' inferior others – as in the case of the colonisers who civilised their colonial subjects (Jack, 2015; Prasad, 2003). Subsidiary employees from the 'colonial margins' are often expected to emulate Western ideals (Frenkel, 2008), a phenomenon that the renowned postcolonial theorist Homi Bhabha (1990, 1994) described as mimicry. Mimicry is seen as enabling the 'colonised' to improve themselves (Prasad, 2006), while helping 'the colonisers' to maintain control through representation. Importantly, individuals who attempt to mimic colonial archetypes never measure up to the ideal (Bhabha, 1994), and their performance continues to be scrutinised and assessed by the colonisers, who highlight the ways in which the mimic differs from the ideal (Thomson and Jones, 2016). Importantly, processes like mimicry may depend on crucial 'collaborative local actors' who play a mediating role in encouraging and helping local counterparts to take the direction laid out by Western parent companies (Boussebaa et al., 2014), thereby emulating the 'indigenous elites' of colonial times (Jayawardena, 2002).

In the cross-cultural literature on diversity management, most of the efforts to transfer diversity practices across national boundaries have been seen as failing and/or leading to some form of tension and backlash (Özbilgin et al., 2012). 'Cultural differences' are highlighted as the dominant explanation for failures or tensions (Lauring, 2013). According to Prasad (2006), parent companies may develop accounts that explain failed diversity initiatives in terms of 'fixed and unchangeable' cultural characteristics because this inevitably

positions subsidiaries as a deficit category and reproduces the idea that marginal groups are continually in need of help. He goes even further, suggesting that it may be in the interests of Western parent companies to design and transfer diversity practices that are inevitably doomed to fail. Although the cross-cultural literature provides useful accounts of how control and dominance are exercised in the global transfer of diversity discourses and practices, and highlights how some subsidiaries attempt to adapt to Western models (Hennekam et al., 2017), less attention is paid to the issue of how subsidiaries and their employees protest and resist as agents. The critical diversity literature follows a similar pattern, focusing on how powerful organisational actors mobilise discourses of diversity to exercise control and legitimise their positions (Zanoni and Janssens, 2015), while paying less attention to how less powerful organisational actors respond to the subject positions attributed to them in discourses of diversity. This is a significant omission, because no form of dominance is an absolute state: it can be discursively challenged by dominated groups (Van Dijk, 1993). Scholars researching the global transfer of knowledge from a postcolonial viewpoint argue that any response on the part of subsidiaries should be analysed as a strategic action that demonstrates agency (Frenkel, 2008).

I will now draw on a case study of diversity management in a globalised knowledge work firm in Sri Lanka to understand (i) the subject positions offered to subsidiary employees in transferred discourses of diversity and (ii) how the positions attributed to them are challenged, and what the implications may be.

Research design

An inductive qualitative study (Thomas, 2006) was conducted at the case study organisation, a Sri Lankan subsidiary of a leading European multinational organisation that offers ICT services to foreign clients. An inductive approach is particularly appropriate for this study because the intention is to develop theory through the emerging data rather than test any pre-determined hypotheses. I selected this organisation because at the time of the data collection it was in the process of implementing a diversity management agenda that had been transferred from its parent company, and therefore challenge and resistance (phenomena I was interested in investigating) were heightened as the employees sought to make sense of the new diversity management agenda and what it meant to them. I draw on 41 one-to-one interviews: four HR personnel, four senior managers, 16 line managers and 17 women engineers. Twenty of the respondents were women and twenty-six were men. I chose to interview a selection of individuals from HR, senior management, line management and the junior executive ranks because I wanted to explore the distinct perceptions and experiences of an array of the organisational actors. All the interviewees were at a graduate level or equivalent.

Data collection

The participants were recruited through a combination of purposive and snowballing sampling methods (Silverman, 2009). I gained access to the respondents by engaging with a contact in the Human Resources Department and explaining my interest in exploring diversity issues related to gender. Data were collected through qualitative interviews.

A series of open-ended questions were employed to encourage participants to interpret the questions subjectively and respond in their own words. In the one-to-one interviews, the respondents were asked to describe the nature and shape of the transferred diversity management agenda. They were also asked to explain how diversity initiatives are justified by senior organisational personnel, and how employees experience and respond to the process. I was particularly keen to understand how the diversity agenda impacted the employees' sense of self, and how their responses were shaped by identity dynamics. The interviews were undertaken in English because all the respondents spoke English fluently. Employees who work for these globalised organisations tend to communicate mainly in English in their professional interactions. When the respondents introduced their own topics into the conversation, I reflected with the participants on what they said. As a result, the data were (to some extent) analysed during the collection process. Each interview lasted between one and two hours, therefore providing sufficient time to explore the topics until the interviewer and participant felt they had been adequately covered. All the interviews were recorded in digital audio. I acknowledge certain limitations of the research design. The sample was not randomly selected, but based on individuals who responded to the research invitation. Furthermore, the HR personnel acted as gatekeepers in the sample selection, and I must acknowledge the potential influence of this on the collected data. However, the respondents were assured that their confidentiality would be maintained, and they shared their thoughts freely. The fact that the researcher was affiliated with an academic institution in the UK appeared to reassure the participants of her independence from the organisation.

Data analysis

As noted above, data analysis took place throughout the research (Silverman, 2009), taking the form of what has been described as a common iterative process (Strauss and Corbin, 1994). After all the interviews had been conducted, I used thematic analysis (King, 2004) to analyse the respondents' narratives. I focused on the content of what had been discussed rather than on how it was conveyed. Thematic analysis involves sorting data into themes. The first level of coding was descriptive. I examined the data, looking for emergent themes and key differences and similarities between them. I gave these 'codes' descriptive labels, and assigned data extracts to them. As I worked through the transcripts, I reviewed these descriptors and the data within them, amending them accordingly to ensure both consistency and manageability. These first-level codes were local in the sense that they were grounded in the respondents' accounts of their specific work settings. Once the initial codes had been constructed, sections of data were assigned to them. I adopted what is called 'progressive focusing', defining empirical codes somewhat loosely at the beginning but then defining them more specifically as the analysis progressed (Hammersley and Atkinson, 1997). From the descriptive codes, I developed more generic, more conceptual second-order themes (Silverman, 2009). In view of the broad way in which the individuals talked about diversity management, the second-order conceptual codes were amalgamated to develop key third-order aggregate themes. Table 1 outlines my coding template, and offers insights into how the second- and third-order codes were developed from the first-order descriptive themes.

Table 1. Coding template.

First-order codes	Second-order codes	Aggregate themes
• Under-utilisation of talent • Benefits of increasing the representation of women and minority groups	Business case for gender diversity	Discourse of diversity originating from the parent company
• Customers' perceptions of diversity • Needs of the new generation of employees	Fashion case for diversity	
• Low representation of women • Perceptions of workplace equality	Social justice case for gender diversity	
• Caring • Relational • Empathetic	Women engineers are a homogenous deficit category	Positioning subsidiary employees along occupational lines
• Few opportunities for women • Gendered obstacles • Women need help	Women engineers are victims and require special privileges	
• Achieving gender targets • Undergoing diversity training • Little input in the diversity agenda	Managers have little discretion and competence	
• Meritocracy is compromised through diversity • Guilt accompanies implementing diversity • Advocates of diversity lack accreditation • Advocates of diversity lack field-specific knowledge and experience	There are contradictions in the diversity agenda	Employees of subsidiary challenging discourses of diversity that originate from the parent company
	Proponents of diversity lack legitimacy	
• The diversity message is vague • Heterogeneity amongst women • Women do not need help	The underlying assumptions of the diversity agenda can be refuted	
• Retention of women after childbirth • Gender division of labour in society • Getting women on to the engineering pipeline	There are alternative views of diversity to what is offered by the organisation	

(Continued)

Table 1. (Continued)

First-order codes	Second-order codes	Aggregate themes
• Refusing to cooperate with diversity initiatives • Boycotting diversity training • Influencing others to resist	Managers as agentic	Employees of subsidiary repositioning the self as resistive and inspiring others to resist
• Highlighting unfemininity • Highlighting technical competence • Highlighting self-reliance • Distancing from the diversity agenda • Influencing others to distance	Women engineers as detached and independent	
• Working with schools • Changing perceptions in the community • Reflecting on the meaning of diversity • Providing specific suggestions to HR	Senior women as drivers of change	
• Motherhood • Karma • Conventional gender ideologies • Technical skills over soft skills	Sri Lankan cultural discourse	
• Clarity • Discretion • Informal cooperation • Deviating from rules	Culturally mediated styles of work	

The findings section shows the interaction between the aggregate themes, and highlights how individuals attempt to reposition themselves in alternative ways by challenging the transferred discourses of diversity through micro-discursive activity. I use pseudonyms to refer to the respondents in order to preserve their anonymity.

The case study organisation

The local organisation initially operated successfully as a business serving multiple clients in different geographic locations. The well-known parent organisation acquired it as a subsidiary. The company boasted a highly desirable work environment, with flexible working options and ample opportunities for career development. It provided employment for qualified graduate-level individuals, of whom 10% were women. Two-thirds of these women were engineers, and female representation at the senior management level stood at 2%. Diversity formed a central part of the parent company's core values. Consistency across all global operating units being a priority, it was in the process of rolling out its diversity management policies and practices to the Sri Lankan subsidiary. The parent organisation's diversity agenda focused on increasing the representation of women in management; however, gender diversity was not seen by the subsidiary as a central concern (Özbilgin et al., 2012). Although no data were collected from the parent company, it appeared that its aim was simply to transfer its tried and tested gender diversity agenda to the subsidiary, and the subsidiary's senior managers were busy with the implementation of these policies and practices. Gender diversity was heavily promoted through a range of campaigns and formal organisational meetings, often with reference to the business (Litvin, 2002) and social justice case. Gender diversity goals were targeted through a series of systems and processes such as flexible working initiatives, training and development programmes, gender-based quotas for leadership, mentoring schemes for women and gender-based networks. Managers were awarded financial incentives for achieving these goals. The participants explained that diversity management was a relatively new and fashionable phenomenon (Prasad et al., 2011) in Sri Lanka.

The Sri Lankan context

Sri Lanka is a collectivistic (Wijayatilake, 2001), multi-ethnic, multi-religious country with a population of approximately 20 million people. Seventy percent of the population are Sinhalese Buddhists, and minority groups include Tamil Hindus, Christians and Muslims. Scholars describe Sri Lanka as a high power distance society characterised by socioeconomic divides between people (Niles, 1998). The ideal Sri Lankan woman is expected to be obedient, modest and hard-working (Wijayatilake, 2001), whereas the ideal man is expected to provide for and protect the females in his family at all times. Despite the patriarchal nature of its society, the sociocultural position of Sri Lankan women is favourable compared with that of women in other South Asian countries. There is a widespread acceptance of education and employment for women, and there is no significant gender disparity in literacy rates, which are 92.8% for males and 90% for females (Labour Force Survey, 2013). Women comprise 63.2% of all professionals in Sri

Lanka; however, they account for only 20% of senior officials (Department of Census and Statistics, 2009). Following a three-decade-long ethnic war, which came to an end in 2009, Sri Lanka is in the process of modernising and developing its economy by serving the global market. The knowledge outsourcing industry is one of the largest in the country. By building on its high literacy rates, English language proficiency and skillsets in information technology and accounting, Sri Lanka is keen to become a global knowledge hub. Although Sri Lanka fully intends to reap the benefits of globalisation, many citizens do not wish to wholly embrace Westernisation, on the grounds that it may compromise traditional values (Ozra, 2001) and conflict with established patterns of work, which are characterised by informal cooperation (Croft and Fernando, 2018) and personal discretion. From this perspective, Sri Lanka is an extremely interesting context in which to study how diversity management discourses and practices transferred by foreign parent companies play out in local subsidiaries.

Findings

I first discuss the discourses of diversity that originated from the parent organisation, highlighting how these were mobilised by the subsidiary's senior managers and HR personnel. I then show how local line managers and female engineers were positioned in unfavourable ways in these discourses, and go on to address how these parties entered the negotiating space to challenge the positions attributed to them.

Discourses of diversity originating from the parent company

The senior managers and HR personnel of the subsidiary emphasised the urgent need to implement diversity management in their organisation, drawing on story lines related to the business case (Litvin, 2002), social justice and fashion (Prasad et al., 2011). HR Director Gina explains the *business case* for gender diversity:

> We are not utilising a big portion of our talent base and this is not efficient. Research shows how organisations increase profits after getting more women to the board. Diversity is very important to NAME – it is a part of their core values and by default our values. They have done wonders over there [the parent company] getting more women into the management pipeline, which is great for creativity etc. They strongly believe that there is much to be gained through attention to diversity. (Gina, HR Director)

Emphasising that diversity is a central aspect of the parent organisation's core values (Meriläinen et al., 2009), Gina suggests that employees of the subsidiary should also embrace this version of diversity (Frenkel, 2008). Indeed, Gina assumes the role of a 'collaborative local actor' (Boussebaa et al., 2014) who convinces subsidiary employees to walk in the direction set out by the Western parent firms. In attempting to promote the transferred gender diversity agenda with reference to the business case, Gina and other senior directors emphasised that women engineers have distinct stereotypically feminine skills that can be beneficial for the organisation:

> Women are more empathetic, and they are able to connect to people and lead them to great heights. Sri Lankan women are in general extremely caring and nurturing – motherliness is part of our culture and we can utilise these unique skills of women to develop relationships and nurture others to take the company forward. So it is essential to set targets. (Gina)

Gina grounds her argument in culturally and historically situated grand discourses of gender in Sri Lanka (Wijayatilake, 2001). In the competitive ICT industry, which values technical competence above all else, Gina positions women engineers as a homogenous deficit category by emphasising stereotypically feminine attributes over technical competence. Although attempting to move minorities up the hierarchy can challenge inequality, essentialising attributes linked to minority identities and presenting these as natural and obvious (Litvin, 1997) can concurrently serve to reproduce inequality, as minorities are recognised as having different skills from the norm.

The need for diversity was also articulated with reference to social justice. HR personnel and female senior managers argued that a low representation of women in senior positions is morally incorrect, and that organisations should consider that women do not have the same opportunities as men:

> There is a need to empower women in Sri Lanka. Our foreign partners feel very strongly about it. Women are sparsely represented at senior levels in our organisation. It is not right. They see it as a moral responsibility to restore equality, because women in Sri Lanka are disadvantaged in many ways. (Maduri, Senior manager)

Maduri highlights how the social justice case for gender diversity originating from the parent organisation positions women in Sri Lanka as a *disadvantaged* category. From this perspective, it is implied that the 'superior' parent organisation has a moral obligation to 'help' disadvantaged others in the subsidiary (Prasad, 2003). Power relations are thus reproduced through a reasoning process that represents the parent company in a positive light (in their desire to help others) and the subsidiary in a negative light (in need of help) (Van Dijk, 2006). Although many other managers echoed Maduri, and stressed that women engineers need help in order to progress, their discussions of diversity did not involve questioning the normative privileged position occupied by men in their profession (Perriton, 2009), or acknowledging the gender-based othering that women workers encounter in the industry.

Senior managers also made a *fashion* case for diversity (Prasad et al., 2011), arguing that diversity is essential in order to keep up with other organisations in the industry and to 'be seen' as being modern and proactive. Notwithstanding its central position as a core organisational value and an essential part of employees' development, it appears that diversity management was also seen as a marketing tactic within the MNC. Senior manager Rahul explains:

> For a company that competes at a global level like us, it is important to signify to customers that we care about the right things and that we are up to date with the latest trends. People want to work for companies that give them the opportunity to be what they want to be. Otherwise we will struggle to recruit the best. (Rahul, Senior manager)

Rahul draws attention to the 'impressions' created by diversity agendas. In explaining how his organisation has kept up with global diversity trends, Rahul emphasised that *all* line managers are subjected to compulsory diversity training and have been asked to achieve their gender targets. In the process, he represented line managers as individuals with little agency and discretion:

> Training was made compulsory for all our managers – and everybody has to attend these. We adopt a policy of continuous reinforcement because people forget otherwise. Managers are now required to achieve gender targets in their teams and prioritize female candidates in recruitment. Their performance is evaluated on this basis. We are taking diversity very seriously – we want to be known as an organisation that takes this very seriously. (Rahul)

Other senior managers and HR personnel said the same as Rahul. In the following sections, I explore how line managers and female engineers experienced and responded to the positions they were offered (Harré and Van Langenhove, 1999) in transferred diversity discourses.

Experiencing the positions offered by discourses of diversity

All the line managers and women engineers were unhappy about the way they were represented in discourses of diversity. Line manager Mahadevan explains:

> They flaunt the fact that training has been made compulsory to show the world that they take diversity seriously. I feel very insulted in being 'asked' to go for these compulsory diversity trainings and to be told by HR how exactly to support my staff. I am an experienced manager – I feel like a puppet who is expected to do everything that I am asked to do regardless of how ridiculous it is. (Mahadevan, Line manager)

When probed about the content of the training programmes he participated in, Mahadevan was unable to identify any major source of inadequacy or irrelevance. However, the discourse related to the *compulsory* nature of the diversity training and the requirement to achieve set targets made him feel as if he had little agency in his capacity as an experienced line manager. Nathan argued that he does not follow the diversity procedures imposed by the parent company because they are not in line with his accustomed approach to work:

> For Western people everything has to happen according to the protocol and every little thing has to be monitored and reported. We are not used to it. I don't like to be told what to do in my capacity as a manager. I don't want to feel that I have to dance according to anyone else's tune – that is, unless I have written the tune myself. We generally get the job done but we do it in the way that we think is best. (Nathan)

Nathan draws a distinction between 'us [Sri Lankans] and them [Western]', and presents flexibility and rigidity as exemplars of being Sri Lankan and Western (Litvin, 1997). Although he is referring to cultural differences, his excerpt suggests that he is more

concerned about the fact that he had little opportunity to shape the organisation's diversity agenda. In other words, he felt like a tightly-controlled line manager with little discretion, and positions this as particularly problematic for 'flexible' Sri Lankans like himself.

Almost all the women engineers we interviewed expressed their disgust at being positioned as recipients of special privileges and as 'needing help' (Romain et al., 2019):

> It makes me cringe when I hear that women need to be helped within the organisation. I feel offended as an independent engineer. I certainly don't need any special privileges and I don't want anyone to think that I do. (Tasha)

Tasha argues that being associated with the social justice case for diversity is inconsistent with her identity as an independent engineer. Making the point that she does not require special privileges, she expresses her disgust at the notion that 'women need help in order to progress'. Although the senior leadership team was not entirely homogenous and included some female agents (Wiseman et al., 2012), these women appeared to lack the required power (Lewis and Simpson, 2010) and awareness to reflect the interests of young women engineers in the diversity discourses imposed by the parent company.

Female engineers agreed that positioning women as 'needing help' (Romain et al., 2019) implicitly excludes them from the core of the profession (Lewis and Simpson, 2010) and condemns them to the margins in less prestigious hybrid roles. In Mekala's words:

> The only place someone who needs help is going to go is to one of these new soft roles with a management title. It is a way of justifying that women are not good enough for the important jobs. I certainly don't have to be helped out by being given a hybrid role. (Mekala)

Repositioning the self through challenging the diversity agenda

The respondents attempted to reposition themselves by challenging the diversity agenda through four key discourses. In most cases, individuals mobilised these discourses in their conversations with others (Bisel and Barge, 2011), but in a few cases they confronted the proponents of organisational diversity directly. Through their micro-discursive activity, individuals made a case for *not* cooperating with the organisation's diversity agenda, crafting a storyline of resistance that enabled them to reposition themselves in a more agentic way.

There are contradictions in the diversity agenda

Almost all the line managers talked about how they had discussed with others the fact that diversity practices such as gender-based targets go against fairness even though from a social justice perspective they are represented as practices that ensure it:

> I share my view with many others – I have to. I felt guilty for what happened in my team. I had to put forward a woman for promotion in my team just because she was a woman. She was the worst performer in the group and the only reason she was put forward was because she is a

woman. We could only put one case forward. There were three other guys who were much better than her who deserved to be put forward over her. So you can see that these quota systems are problematic. I am accumulating karma for letting it happen. I am the manager of the team, after all. (Akila)

Akila speaks in ironic terms (Potter, 1996) of the claim that diversity enhances fairness in the organisation. He draws on well-known broad cultural ideas of 'karma' (Fernando and Cohen, 2013) to enable his audience to better appreciate the emotional dilemmas he experiences as he is compelled to overlook more deserving candidates in order to implement the gender-based quota. After refuting the organisation's diversity agenda, Akila goes on to explain how he refuses to cooperate with diversity initiatives in the spirit of not encouraging unfair practice:

> I don't do most of the things that we are asked to do. I was asked to talk to this US company about doing a diversity training programme here – I am not lifting a finger. I tell people because they might be inspired to follow my lead. I don't think that I am doing anything wrong. It doesn't make sense to do things which are meaningless – things that encourage unfairness. It makes sense to try to stop it from happening. (Akila)

Highlighting the contradictions in discourses of diversity provides space for Akila to refuse to cooperate with the diversity agenda (Ainsworth and Hardy, 2004) and position himself in a more agentic manner in the process. It is striking in Akila's account how he inspires others to follow his lead, illuminating the potential for power relations to shift (Van Dijk, 1993) as people cooperate with each other in their resistance.

Line manager Hasitha talked in similar terms about how he discussed and invalidated the social justice case for diversity with other colleagues, highlighting the significant contradiction between 'fairness' and the organisation's tendency to ignore social class diversity and class-based exclusion in recruitment and selection processes:

> I think social class is a more important area for the Sri Lankan private sector than gender. Leading organisations like this only employ people who speak perfect English. This leaves out most of the country's population, who are not privileged enough to speak fluent English, including graduates from rural areas. We should be doing something about it. Instead, we are just asked to prioritise female candidates in selection. Nobody has explained to me why gender is so important for us in Sri Lanka. The gender statistics of this organisation are not too different from other Sri Lankan organisations. Some women in Sri Lanka don't even want to work for that matter – especially after they have children. My managerial autonomy is compromised in having to do things just because people in the [Name of Parent Company] do it. I don't participate in any diversity initiatives. I avoid them. I have told many other colleagues and I am sure that they avoid them too. (Hasitha, Line manager)

Hasitha justifies his refusal to cooperate with the organisation's diversity agenda, stressing the fact that it does not address key areas of fairness that matter in the Sri Lankan context. Furthermore, he makes the point that he does not see gender diversity as an area of significance for Sri Lankan organisations. This may be a reflection of the patriarchy that characterises Sri Lankan society (Niles, 1998). What is surprising is the fact that

nobody had explained the significance of gender diversity to him. Underlining that he feels like a manager with little autonomy, Hasitha avoids participating in his organisation's diversity agenda, positioning himself in a more agentic manner in the process. He has also managed to convince other colleagues to cooperate in his resistance.

The assumptions underpinning the diversity agenda can be rejected

A number of younger female engineers talked about how they reject the assumptions underpinning the diversity agenda with other colleagues. Junior engineer Sharika explained how she challenged the view that women are different from men:

> So we are told that we need to have more women in senior positions because women bring empathy and all sorts of skills to the organisation, which has been found to increase profits. How can you say that? In line with Sri Lankan culture we possibly like to believe that all women are nurturing and motherly and emotional, but this is not always the case. I don't see myself as a highly emotive person. And I don't want people thinking about me like this typical woman. It doesn't help your career – especially in this industry. My main interest is in my work and in colleagues who do the kind of work that I do. I tell every engineer I know to be careful of this diversity business. (Sharika, Junior engineer)

Sharika ironises the claim (Potter, 1996) that women are more empathic and nurturing than men. By drawing attention to the cultural influence on individuals' thinking and actions, Sharika forces people to think of these phenomena as being socially constructed (Burr, 2003). She uses this and a perceived lack of femininity as a legitimate basis for distancing herself from the organisation's diversity agenda and advises other female colleagues to do the same because they are at risk of undermining their engineering identity. In the process, Sharika attempts to reposition herself as a detached engineer.

Mid-career engineer Nadia argued that the gender-based quota system for leadership is founded on the assumption that women have excellent people management skills, and explained how she challenges this assumption in her daily interactions with other female engineering colleagues:

> Women are aligned with managerial roles implying that they are this particular kind of species who has excellent people skills and must therefore be involved in management. But this implies that women may not be that great at tech. In this industry, glory comes from technical capability. As a female engineer I am most proud of my technical capability, I don't think I am particularly good with people. In our country, technical and scientific skills are held in higher esteem than soft skills. I have very little to do with any of this. I maintain my connections with my team and my work. This is the advice that I give to any woman engineer who steps into this organisation. I don't want people gloating that I am best at people skills and so let's channel me into management. It makes me sound like an HR person. I am an engineer. (Nadia, Engineer)

Nadia uses herself as an example in order to refute gender-based stereotypes, and highlights the career costs of this kind of stereotyping for women engineers (Fernando et al., 2018). She grounds her point in the broader Sri Lankan cultural context, suggesting that Sri Lankans place a higher value on technical skills than on soft skills. Nadia shares her

sentiments with other women, setting the stage for them to follow her example and distance themselves from diversity initiatives. She positions herself as a technically adept engineer, distinguishing herself from non-technical women and stigmatising them. Although women like Nadia and Sharika are not opposed to pursuing leadership roles, they distanced themselves from the diversity agenda because they were adamant that *gendered positioning* will be career suicide for women in the engineering profession, representing them as candidates who are not able to succeed in a technical role, and condemning them to 'less prestigious' hybrid roles. In Dedunu's words:

> It seems like a way of justifying that you are not good enough for a proper technical role and then passing you off to one of these new soft technical roles, but giving you a senior position so it feels like it is a good thing although it is not. (Dedunu)

Dedunu suggests that maintenance of the status quo can be designed into organisations' diversity agendas (Zanoni and Janssens, 2015).

Proponents of diversity lack legitimacy

Many respondents talked about how they spoke ill of diversity trainers with other colleagues, citing their lack of legitimate accreditation and qualifications. In the process, they attempted to make a case for boycotting diversity training programmes, and attempted to position themselves as agentic, competent individuals who have discretion about the way they choose to spend their time:

> We went for a training recently and the person who conducted it was not even properly qualified and didn't understand the kind of work we do here. The HR team goes on about diversity. Nobody in their right mind would go on and on about something which sounds so vague. This approach doesn't work for our culture. Our people want clarity. Having to go for these diversity trainings is insulting for managers. I don't now go to anything. I avoid it. I have tried to make other people understand how I feel and what I do as a line manager. I came up with all this at a team leader meeting – I told people that I think that the whole idea of diversity is rubbish and I don't find the people who deliver the message credible. (Yusof)

Although line manager Yusof was not able to identify any particular issues with the content of the training programme, he insists that diversity trainers lacked credible accreditation. Furthermore, he suggests that diversity is a vague construct (Schwabenland and Tomlinson, 2015) and casts doubt on its practical usefulness, especially in the Sri Lankan context, in which people value clarity. In the process of sharing his sentiments with others, he not only justifies his ongoing efforts at rejection, but also prompts others to do the same. In the process, he positions himself as an agentic manager who is not subjected to any form of control by others.

Line manager Duvaraka provided similar insights into how she demeans diversity trainers and HR personnel with other colleagues:

> We were talking about who these people are, which body they are accredited with and how they can claim status as experts. They just can't and the HR people who advocate this all – what do

they know about anything? We were saying to each other that it really doesn't make sense to waste our time on this. We should just not go. We are legitimate professionals after all – no one can expect us to run according to their plan. (Duvaraka, Line manager)

In highlighting her decision not to attend diversity training, Duvaraka follows Yusof's example, and repositions herself as an agentic professional who is not subject to organisational control.

There are alternative interpretations of diversity to those offered by the organisation

A few senior women engineers confronted senior managers and HR personnel directly to provide alternative interpretations of gender diversity, and offered to work with the organisation to change the shape of the diversity agenda, repositioning themselves as *change makers*. Senior engineer Tasha explains how she engaged with HR and senior management:

I talked to HR about the agenda. We are harming women engineers by implying that they need special support to progress. If gender diversity is a problem we need to prevent women engineers from leaving once they have children. People leave after childbirth because they think they won't be able to manage their children with work. We need to change societal attitudes. In our culture people are supposed to prioritise motherhood over everything else, and men contribute very little to childcare. I suggested running some advocacy campaigns to encourage more men to participate in childcare. I have tried to get other women involved. I can see some budding activists starting to emerge. It is about planting the seed properly. (Tasha, Senior engineer)

Drawing on isomorphic relationships between organisations and society, Tasha makes the point that changing society's attitudes should be the starting point for the organisation's diversity agenda. She anchors her argument in the Sri Lankan cultural context by drawing on well-rehearsed cultural discourses of motherhood (Wijayatilake, 2001). Highlighting the role she assumes in starting conversations about changing broader cultural ideologies, arguably competing with others in her organisation to advance alternative meanings of diversity (Chouliaraki and Fairclough, 1999), Tasha positions herself as a driver of change and encourages others to be the same. Tasha suggests that atypical leaders who originate from under-represented groups (e.g. gender) are more likely to support social transformation through diversity interventions than 'typical' leaders who are engulfed in the extant status quos. Their simultaneous 'insider–outsider' status may lead to them attempting to change organisations while also seeking progression within them (Samdanis and Özbilgin, 2020).

Jaya provided similar insights into how she confronted HR personnel about positioning women engineers unfavourably. She offered to work with them to shape the diversity agenda, positioning herself as an initiator of change:

We are demeaning them by implying that they need help. Nobody feels that they need help. It is embarrassing. The problem is about increasing participation in technology, getting more

women into the pipeline. I am working closely with several HR people on diversity – having conversations on what we can do to get more girls interested in technology and stop stereotyping women. As we continue to speak, they are broadening their understanding of the many different things that we can do. I am working with schoolteachers to encourage them to channel girls into technology. There is a long way to go but we are getting there. I feel good about driving it. (Jaya)

Jaya offers an alternative interpretation of gender diversity to others in her organisation, one that shifts the purpose towards drawing more women into the engineering pipeline, and uses this to carve out space for herself to become involved in reframing the organisation's diversity agenda. By working closely with HR colleagues, Jaya seeks to transform the nature and shape of the diversity agenda, positioning herself as a change maker. Furthermore, she collaborates with others outside her organisation in taking collective action to challenge conventional gender ideologies in Sri Lankan society (Bisel and Barge, 2011). These findings show how organisational diversity agendas can serve as a vehicle for evoking change in broader societal ideologies.

Taken together, these excerpts show how recipients of diversity agendas challenge diversity in their micro-discursive activity. By censuring discourses of diversity with other people and/or confronting their proponents directly, people negotiated space to reposition themselves.

Summary of key findings

My findings coalesce into a figure on subsidiaries' resistance to the cross-national 'top-down' transfer of diversity discourses from foreign parent companies (see Figure 1).

This figure was developed inductively (Thomas, 2006) by linking the concepts that emerged from the data (see Table 1). The figure shows that diversity discourses originating from the parent company (box a) positioned subsidiary employees in an unfavourable manner (box b). Line managers felt positioned as lacking agency and discretion by being associated with compulsory diversity training and the requirement to achieve gender targets. Young female engineers likewise felt positioned as victimised subjects by being associated with needing 'help to progress' under the social justice storyline, and being linked with excessively feminine attributes under the business case. Zanoni and Janssens (2015) show how individuals produce meanings of diversity that reaffirm their own occupational practices and subject positions. In contrast, I show how diversity discourses are used to position 'the other' along occupational lines, and how the 'other' responds to the 'unfavourable' positions attributed to them. Positioning instigated the employees of the subsidiary to engage in micro-discursive activity in order to challenge the discourses that positioned them in unfavourable ways (box c). The line managers highlighted contradictions in the transferred discourses of diversity and undermined proponents of this diversity agenda. The young women engineers drew on their own selves to refute the underlying assumptions of transferred diversity discourses. The mid- and late-career women engineers worked with internal and external parties to offer alternative interpretations of gender diversity to the proponents. By mounting a challenge, the individuals negotiated space within which to reposition themselves (Harré et al., 2009)
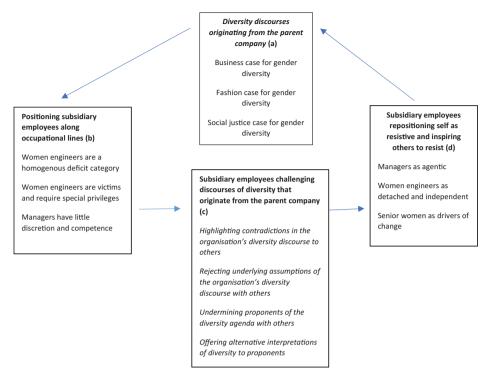
Figure 1. Subsidiaries' resistance to the 'top-down' cross-national transfer of diversity discourses from foreign parent companies.

in more favourable terms (box d). The line managers positioned themselves as agentic and as able to influence others, the women engineers positioned themselves as detached and independent from the diversity agenda and the senior women positioned themselves as drivers of organisational change. One striking finding emerging from the data is how less powerful organisational actors' repositioning efforts inspired others to follow their lead. For instance, the agentic managers inspired others to boycott diversity initiatives in the organisation, the young women engineers inspired other women to collaborate with their decision to distance themselves from the gender diversity agenda and the senior women secured the cooperation of others to drive organisational change. The individuals' repositioning efforts potentially shape understandings of diversity management mobilised within subsidiary organisations, contributing to a view of diversity management as a continuously negotiated construct (Janssens and Zanoni, 2005).

Discussion and contribution

The cross-cultural literature depicts the transfer of diversity management practices across global operating units as mostly a one-directional process that is constrained by fixed and unchangeable 'cultural differences' (Lauring, 2013; Özbilgin et al., 2012). I move beyond

essentialist cultural differences arguments to shed light on how the global transfer of diversity management is influenced by dynamic power relations between Western parent and non-Western subsidiary firms that are embedded in the nostalgic colonial past.

By being represented as superior to non-West firms (Frenkel, 2008), Western parent organisations have a great deal of power and authority to create and transmit 'their own version of diversity' to non-Western subsidiaries. Power differentials between the companies are heightened as diversity is employed as a tool to position employees of the subsidiary in unfavourable occupational terms (Zanoni and Janssens, 2015). From a postcolonial perspective, the coloniser's superior knowledge is reinstated, and it is granted further authority to 'civilise the natives' (Jack, 2015; Prasad, 2006). Indeed, the expectation that local subsidiaries will embrace the diversity discourses and practices that have been transferred from Western parent companies in a 'top-down' manner can be understood as an expression of mimicry (Bhabha, 1990, 1994) which assumes that individuals from the colonial margins would always aspire to construct their identities in relation to the colonial archetype (Thomson and Jones, 2016) and by default continue to be dependent on the coloniser for representation. The finding that local senior managers of the subsidiary joined hands with the parent organisation to reproduce its dominance and actively supported and mobilised transferred diversity discourses and practices that marginalised their own people is highly significant. These agents emulated the 'indigenous elites' of colonial times (Jayawardena, 2002), acting as 'collaborative local agents' who encouraged assimilation (Boussebaa et al., 2014). Given that these individuals help reduce the agency costs that arise due to conflicts of interest (Wiseman et al., 2012), they may derive benefits from their compliance, like the 'indigenous elites' who gained wealth and status by acquiring and helping to transmit the linguistic and cultural practices of their colonial masters (Jayawardena, 2002).

Modern expectations of mimicry in the global transfer of diversity management were challenged and contested by the employees of the subsidiary, however. The challenge was motivated by a feeling that individuals were being patronised, controlled and undermined by diversity discourses and practices that had been imposed on them by the parent company rather than by sentiments of 'cultural incompatibility'. Although a few employees constructed essentialised conceptions of culture and cultural differences (Kalonaityte, 2010) in their accounts, culture appeared to be used as a discursive resource (Vaara et al., 2019) to make their arguments more convincing and to strengthen their resistance to perceived Western dominance, as opposed to impacting on their experience of diversity in a deterministic way.

The overriding factor that triggered their challenge was 'transferred' diversity discourses causing a gap between experienced and attributed identity (Villesèche et al., 2018) linked to occupation (Zanoni and Janssens, 2015). Individuals' understanding of themselves as particular kinds of occupational beings is central to their sense of self (Kitay and Wright, 2007), and so when these understandings are challenged, people are motivated to restore consistency. In this case, they did so by repositioning themselves in the course of discursively challenging and collectively resisting diversity discourses that contributed to an unflattering positioning of self. My findings thus explain 'why' the top-down transfer of diversity practices is challenged by employees of subsidiaries in terms of the 'identity effects' of diversity discourses (Villesèche et al., 2018). In other words, the overriding issue is one of power – a power that was exercised discursively by the

parent company through its diversity discourses (Meriläinen et al., 2009), and contributed towards constructing subsidiary recipients of diversity agendas as inferior occupational beings and in need of help (Romain et al., 2019), thereby provoking a response.

The employees of the subsidiary pursued their challenge through persuasive arguments (Gill and Whedbee, 1997; Potter, 1996) that then formed the basis for coalescing with others inside and outside the organisation to resist (Bisel and Barge, 2011) the transferred diversity practices. Not only is counter-power strengthened as people come together, but forming alliances with actors outside the organisation is a particularly effective way to exert influence. The cross-cultural literature on diversity management provides useful insights into how control and dominance are exercised by parent firms in the global transfer of diversity discourses and practices (Hennekam et al., 2017; Özbilgin et al., 2012). I move this debate forward by illustrating the dynamics of resistance that characterise diversity management in non-Western subsidiaries, and depicting employees of subsidiaries as agentic subjects as opposed to passive recipients. By highlighting resistant local voices (Metcalfe and Woodhams, 2012), my findings show how colonial and neo-colonial expressions of dominance are challenged and contested within non-Western subsidiaries. I also contribute towards extending existing understandings of 'agency' in critical diversity scholarship by demonstrating how less powerful organisational actors respond as agents to the unfavourable occupational positions attributed to them in diversity discourses (Romain et al., 2019; Zanoni and Janssens, 2015). My findings show that justification through persuasive argument is a central antecedent of the resistance of actors speaking from 'less privileged' positions. Justification enables individuals to make their resistance collective and powerful, and enhances their ability to influence understandings of diversity management in their work settings. I draw on my findings to conceptualise the global transfer of diversity management as a continuously negotiated process shaped by the dynamic power relations between parent and subsidiary firms.

Conclusion and limitations

I have drawn on empirical research evidence to develop a critique of diversity discourses transferred from Western to non-Western nations within the context of MNCs. I have illustrated and explained theoretically how dynamic power relations between Western parent and non-Western subsidiary companies shape the global transfer of diversity management across MNCs, depicting employees of subsidiaries as agentic subjects as opposed to passive recipients. I recognise that my findings are based on a case study of one single organisation and that this might be seen as a limitation with regard to transferability. My aim, however, has been to achieve analytical generalisation (Yin, 2013) by generalising the theory that I developed through my case study. My findings will be useful for gaining an understanding of an array of situations in MNCs. Scholars can use them to understand how individuals might respond to organisational change initiatives that may position certain parties in distinct ways, triggering identity dilemmas and resistance. Similarly, they may be helpful for understanding the interpersonal dynamics of mergers and takeovers, specifically in relation to how people feel positioned in discourse, how they may react to it and what the implications might be. With regard to directions for future research, ethnographic and longitudinal studies are needed to understand how

the alternative positions that employees of subsidiaries attempt to negotiate are received by parent organisational representatives. Studies examining diversity management in different industries and cultural settings will be useful in order to better understand the role that industry culture plays in shaping dynamics related to resistance.

Implications

My findings have significant implications for organisational policy makers, diversity practitioners, HR personnel, line managers and ordinary employees. First, when transferring diversity management agendas across global operating units, multinational companies must involve representative employees from their subsidiaries (from all levels and categories) during the process. Working together will enable parent companies to consider employees of their subsidiaries as equal partners in diversity management, and therefore to refrain from positioning these parties in an unflattering light. In addition, parent companies will be better able to secure local ownership of diversity agendas, as employees of their subsidiaries cease feeling patronised by unequal relationships with parent companies, and refrain from responding antagonistically. Second, and in the same vein, I highlight the importance of paying careful attention to how the diversity message is communicated and considering how different employees may interpret and experience the message. If they experience organisational discourses of diversity as being demeaning to their sense of self, they may distance themselves from the agenda and/or attempt to sabotage it. Senior managers and HR practitioners, although not rejecting the benefits of 'identity-conscious' diversity initiatives, should refrain from making essentialist arguments, which have the effect of categorising people and playing down their heterogeneity. Third, groups of employees in subsidiaries should be brought together for informal discussions on diversity management, including the darker sides of diversity. These discussions are useful for understanding people's views and frustrations about diversity and ensuring that they are minimised as the diversity agenda is implemented. Fourth, each person involved in implementing diversity agendas in organisations should be encouraged to question their own assumptions and reflect on the extent to which they impose identities on others. This is vital for avoiding stereotyping. Finally, it is important to consider the credibility of the 'message givers' who are responsible for communicating the organisation's diversity agenda.

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