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**Doctoral Thesis**

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THE CHAMELEON WORKFORCE: ASSEMBLING AND NEGOTIATING THE CONTENT OF A WORKFORCE

PhD Series 08-2016

Mikkel Mouritz Marfelt

# THE CHAMELEON WORKFORCE

## ASSEMBLING AND NEGOTIATING THE CONTENT OF A WORKFORCE

PhD School in Organisation and Management Studies

PhD Series 08.2016

**CBS** COPENHAGEN BUSINESS SCHOOL  
HANDELSHØJSKOLEN

# THE CHAMELEON WORKFORCE

ASSEMBLING AND NEGOTIATING  
THE CONTENT OF A WORKFORCE

PhD dissertation by

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October 2015

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# PREFACE

This PhD is structured as an article based dissertation. Some of the chapters have been presented in different formats for different audiences.

- In “Chapter 2: Theory and Methodology”, I present the article titled “Grounded intersectionality: Key tensions, a methodological framework, and implications for diversity research”. An earlier version of this article was presented at the Organizing Action Nets conference at Gothenburg University in November 2012. The article has been accepted for publication in a special issue on ‘Diversity, Diversity Management and Identity’ in *Equality, Diversity and Inclusion: An International Journal*, (forthcoming).
- In “Chapter 4: Analysis Part 1”, I present the article titled “Applying a grounded intersectional perspective to organizational practice – how dominant employee categories emerge”. Earlier versions of this article were presented at the 23rd Nordic Academy of Management Conference at CBS in August 2015. The article has been submitted to the journal *Culture and Organization*. I await the editors’ considerations.
- In “Chapter 5: Analysis Part 2”, I present the article titled “The ‘diverse workforce’ as a boundary concept: Towards new theoretical frontiers in workplace diversity research”. This article was presented at the EGOS 2013 conference in Montreal under subtheme 48: “The Emergence of Categories, Identities, Fields and Organizational Forms”. The article has been submitted to *Journal of Management Studies*. The co-authors and I await the editors’ considerations.
- In “Chapter 6: Analysis Part 3”, I present the article titled “Managing Protean Diversity: An empirical analysis of how organizational contextual dynamics derailed and dissolved global workforce diversity”. This article was presented at the IOA (Department of Organization) Winter Games 2014. The article has been accepted for publication in the *International Journal of Cross Cultural Management*.

To unite the articles into a coherent whole, I have written a common introduction (Chapter 1), have discussed how the articles relate theoretically and methodologically (Chapter 2), and have discussed how the articles relate to my overarching strategy of analysis (Chapter 3). I end this dissertation by discussing implications and concluding on the articles presented throughout the PhD (Chapter 7).

# SUMMARY

Due to advancements in technology and the expansion of companies onto a global level, organizations have become increasingly aware of the need to understand and manage diverse workforces; that is, the need to understand and manage differences among employees across borders (such as geographical, cultural, professional, etc.). This PhD dissertation studies this phenomenon, ‘a diverse workforce’, in a large Scandinavian pharmaceutical company. The dissertation follows the Diverse and Global Workforce (DGW) project, a ‘headquarter centric’ and strategic corporate initiative to address the rapid global expansion of the company workforce.

In academia, the phenomenon has been studied widely for the last three decades under the overarching research field ‘workforce diversity’. While workforce diversity research has contributed to a better understanding of the concept of diversity in work-related situations, the role of ‘workforce’ in this equation is often assumed, reducing the problematic of workforce diversity to a need to understand the concept of ‘diversity in the workforce’. This perception is not without its problems and has led to a focus on the concept of diversity at the expense of understanding the role of the workforce as something other than a simple container of ‘people engaged in or available for work’. And so, even though the ‘workforce’ was foundational to forming workforce diversity research and its related fields (such as diversity management, diversity at work, diversity in the workplace, etc.), discussions about the role of the workforce have become a peripheral debate, while discussions on the role of diversity have become central.

This dissertation consists of four academic articles in journal format, one theoretical article and three empirical articles, as well as a framework that situates and connects these articles, thereby making a coherent whole. The theoretical article contributes to intersectional research by developing a grounded intersectional framework for studying categorization in practice. The first empirical article applies this grounded intersectional study. The article illustrates how a complex categorization process can be analyzed by ‘following categories’ and sequencing the development of these into critical steps. The second empirical article introduces and demonstrates the analytical relevance of a novel theoretical perspective in workforce diversity research, namely the notion of boundary concepts. By applying a theoretical framework inspired by Science and Technology Studies (STS) to social categorization, the article shows the way boundary concepts nuance our understanding of workforce diversity. It illustrates how a diverse

workforce can be viewed as a mediating tool rather than a term used to encapsulate employee differences in the workforce. The third empirical article investigates the preliminary premises that led to the workforce diversity initiative. It shows that early decisions eventually led to a cascade of events that situates the DGW project in a specific and context-dependent way. The article demonstrates how the interplay between multiple actors, both human and non-human, affects workforce diversity, indicating that ‘a diverse workforce’ is a changing and context-specific phenomenon.

Building on the findings in these four articles, this dissertation ends by comparing the different findings and broadening them into a more general discussion of workforce diversity in practice and in research. In the concluding discussion, this dissertation problematizes a central assumption of the DGW project, namely that ‘the company’s workforce is becoming increasingly diverse’. Subsequently, the discussion proceeds to suggest that this assumption is not simply a tendency in the company, but also prevails in parts of the workforce diversity literature. It suggests that a predetermined and essentialist understanding of workforce diversity as a concept able to add or inhibit value, profit, inclusiveness, etc., must be left behind.

# DANSK RESUMÉ

På grund af udviklingen inden for teknologi og virksomheders indtrædelse på den globale scene, er organisationer i stigende grad blevet opmærksom på behovet for, at forstå, og adressere arbejdsstyrkers mangfoldighed. Denne afhandling undersøger fænomenet 'arbejdsstyrke mangfoldighed' i en stor Skandinavisk farmaceutisk virksomhed. Afhandlingen følger projektet "Den mangfoldige og globale arbejdsstyrke", et initiativ drevet fra virksomhedens strategiske og korporative hovedkvarter, der søger at imødekomme udfordringer ved en hurtig international ekspansion af virksomheden arbejdsstyrke.

Inden for det akademiske felt er fænomenet, via paraply begrebet 'arbejdsstyrke mangfoldighed', blevet undersøgt fra mange vinkler de seneste tre årtier. Selvom forskningen har bidraget til en bedre forståelse af mangfoldighed i arbejdsrelaterede situationer, er 'arbejdsstyrken' som koncept, ofte antaget som værende en iboende del af begrebet. Dette har reduceret 'arbejdsstyrke mangfoldighed' til et behov for at forstå forskelligheden blandt med medarbejdere. Denne forståelse er dog ikke uden problemer, og har ført til at et fokus på *mangfoldighed*, med det til følge at 'arbejdsstyrken' forudsættes som et grundlag der henleder til 'mennesker involveret i, eller til rådighed for, arbejde'. Selvom begrebet 'arbejdsstyrke' var central for udformningen af feltet 'arbejdsstyrke mangfoldighed' er diskussioner omkring begrebet gledet i baggrunden, mens diskussioner omkring forskelligheder blandt mennesker er kommet i fokus. Afhandlingen adresserer dette problem ved at studere 'arbejdsstyrke mangfoldighed' med fokus på måden fænomenet kobles til empiriske forståelser af arbejdsstyrken, og dennes mangfoldighed.

Afhandlingen består af fire artikler i akademisk-tidskriftformat. En teoretisk artikel og tre empiriske artikler. Desuden inkluderer afhandlingen en 'ramme' der indplacerer og kobler artiklerne til en sammenhængende størrelse. Den teoretiske artikel bidrager til intersektionalitets-forskningen ved at udvikle en empirisk funderet tilgang til studiet af medarbejderkategorisering in praksis. Den første empiriske artikel benytter denne nyudviklede empirisk-funderet tilgang. Artiklen viser hvordan en kompleks kategorisering proces kan analyseres ved at 'følge kategorierne' og sekvensere, samt reducere kategoriudviklingen til bestående af centrale stadier. Den anden empiriske artikel introducerer og demonstrerer den analytiske relevans af et nyt teoretisk perspektiv, 'grænsekonscept', til brug indenfor arbejdsstyrke-mangfoldighedsforskningen. Ved at applicere en 'Science and Technologies



Studies' inspireret teoretisk ramme viser artiklen hvordan grænsekoncepter nuancerer forståelsen af arbejdsstyrke mangfoldighed. Artiklen viser hvordan en 'mangfoldig arbejdsstyrke' kan forstås som et medierende værktøj til at facilitere samarbejde, i stedet for et koncept der omfavner medarbejderforskelligheder. Den tredje artikel undersøger forudgående præmisser som førte til "Den mangfoldige og globale arbejdsstyrke" initiativet. Artiklen viser hvordan tidlige beslutninger ledte til en kaskade af handlinger, som anbringer initiativet i en specifik kontekst. Her vises hvordan samspillet mellem forskellige aktører, både humane og non-humane, påvirker arbejdsstyrke mangfoldigheden, hvilket indikerer at fænomenet 'den mangfoldige arbejdsstyrke' er et skiftende og kontekst-afhængigt begreb.

På baggrund af indsigterne fra de fire artikler, afsluttes afhandlingen med at sammenligne indsigter og overføre disse til en mere generel diskussion omkring arbejdsstyrke mangfoldighed i praksis og i forskningen. I denne afsluttende diskussion problematiseres den centrale antagelse i virksomhedsinitiativet om at virksomhedens arbejdsstyrke i stigende grad bliver mere mangfoldig. Efterfølgende fortsætter diskussionen med at foreslå at denne antagelse ikke blot er en tendens i virksomheden, men også en mere generel tendens i dele af forskningen i arbejdsstyrke mangfoldighed. Afslutningsvis foreslås det at en forudbestemt og essentialistisk forståelse af fænomenet arbejdsstyrke mangfoldighed, som et koncept der kan tilføre eller fratage værdi, profit, inklusion osv., bør droppes.

# CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

## **Motivation and relevance**

This dissertation is first and foremost a study of the concept of a ‘diverse workforce’ in an organizational setting. The ‘workforce’ – defined by the New Oxford American Dictionary as ‘*the set of people engaged in or available for work*’ (Stevenson and Lindberg, 2010) – is used to describe and relate to various situations in societies and within organizations. The majority of people are part of the workforce during most of their lives, and being unable to work, for example, due to disabilities, sickness, and paternity/maternity leave, can make you feel economically and socially excluded. Moreover, the workforce often takes center stage in political debates, and the way we understand, discuss and construct the workforce informs the way we organize society and organizations. For example, many of the contemporary societal issues we are facing can be linked to discussions about the workforce. How should we decrease unemployment in times of crisis? Can we prepare new generations for the job market by restructuring the available proficiencies, and thus create a different and more educated workforce? And what happens to the workforce when people retire later on in their lives or when immigrants and other foreign workers enter the country? Does the workforce then become more diverse?

Due to advancements in technology, humans have become increasingly able to interact across borders (regardless of whether these borders are geographical, cultural, professional, etc.). This has resulted in an increased interdependency as well as an awareness of the many differences among people across these borders. Understanding this interdependency and the differences among employees in organizations has become a key concern, resulting in several strands of research that can be summarized under the umbrella term *workforce diversity*. Moreover, many organizations are increasingly situated in a global setting. Since these organizations act in a setting where the differences between people may seem greater due to this global reach, workforce diversity issues nonetheless affect both globally- and locally-situated organizations. For example, an increasingly mobile workforce enables the multinational construction company to out-bid the local entrepreneur due to its ability to bring in foreign non-union workers at lower wages. Or, in another example, virtual workplaces enable software engineers to work without physically moving, thus expanding the pool of possible employees onto a global level. From an economic perspective, this provides a globally-situated

organization with some competitive advantages, while also raising a number of challenges. For one, the increased geographical dispersion of employees and organizational stakeholders necessitates an understanding of local circumstances as well as the global footprint these circumstances create in combination. Understanding the *diverse workforce* has therefore become an increasingly important topic to address, particularly in large global organizations. One such organization that needs to understand workforce diversity is PharmaTech (a pseudonym) – the company that provides the organizational setting for this study. It is no coincidence that PharmaTech and ‘a diverse workforce’ were in my line of sight from early on. In 2011, I wrote my Master’s thesis on PharmaTech, and during that time I was made aware of their Diverse and Global Workforce project – the project under investigation in this dissertation. The project focused on PharmaTech’s workforce, in particular, the aspects that make up a diverse (and global) workforce. The project was intended to tackle the challenges accompanied by company success leading to an immense global expansion in the number of employees. However, as unfolded in this dissertation, the composition of ‘a diverse workforce’ proved not to be straightforward.

I was initially intrigued to study workforce diversity by sensing a paradox in how the concept ‘workforce’ has a homogenizing effect as a simple container encapsulating people available for work, while the adjective ‘diverse’ somehow seems to do the opposite, that is, it stresses the heterogeneity among people. During my time at PharmaTech, I experienced different, and often times conflicting, ideas of what this phenomenon was and why it was an important issue. For example, some believed that the organization should be able to accommodate employees’ differences, while others argued that knowing the differences within the workforce would help attract relevant people and help the organization make informed decisions on where to place employees in times of organizational restructuring. These two perspectives pointed to a more fundamental discussion of who was in control, as well as to the difficulty in making different communities agree upon the nature of the workforce. Should the organization adapt to its diverse workforce or should the diverse workforce adapt to other agendas? The different debates revolving around the workforce told a story of how people perceived this phenomenon differently. Despite these diverging views, one thing that everyone seemed to agree on was that the workforce was becoming increasingly diverse, especially as the company was planning to increase its number of employees by almost 50% within the coming decade – an increase from 41.000 to 60.000 employees. But why did people disagree on how to perceive the phenomenon, while agreeing that the same phenomenon was ‘increasing’? The

diverging, yet simultaneously converging perspectives, inspired me to reduce the problematic to a question of how this phenomenon, a diverse workforce, is constructed in an organizational setting.

## **Research questions and the role of each of the four papers**

In the following, I discuss the role of the four research questions (RQ1-4). These four questions are:

1<sup>st</sup> research question (RQ1):

***How is a diverse workforce constructed in an organizational setting?***

2<sup>nd</sup> research question (RQ2):

***What differences exist between organizational representations of ‘a diverse workforce’?***

3<sup>rd</sup> research question (RQ3):

***What are the main contextual factors influencing the construction of a diverse workforce?***

4<sup>th</sup> research question (RQ4):

***How can the findings in the analysis advance workforce diversity research and help overcome practical challenges to managing diverse workforces?***

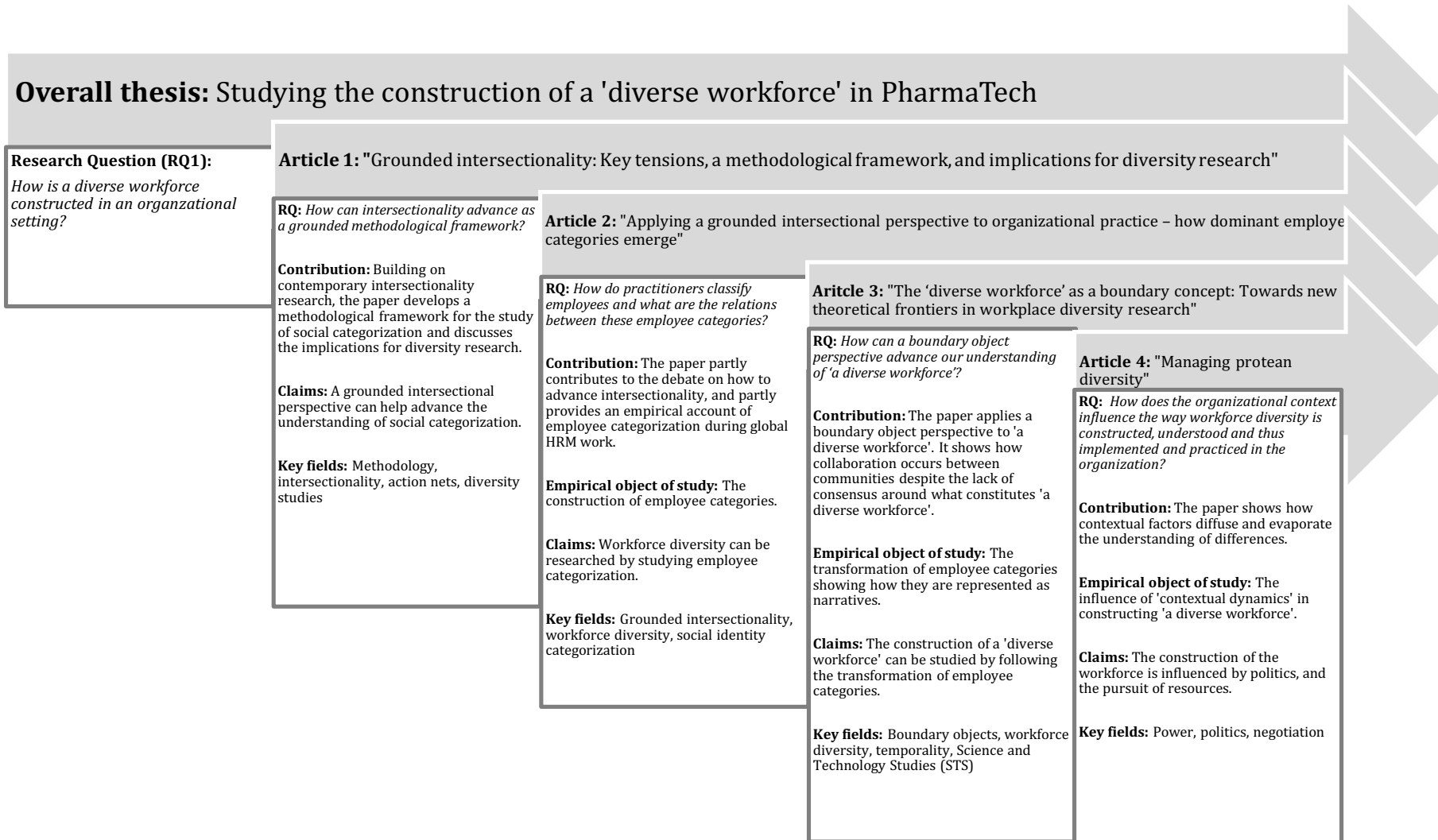
The first research question (RQ1) mimics a ‘descriptive first-order research question’ (Alvesson and Sandberg, 2013, p. 15), the most basic question aimed at finding out what constitutes a phenomenon. Through this question I seek to generate knowledge about what characterizes the phenomenon ‘a diverse workforce’ (what the phenomenon is; what it does; and why it has certain qualities). RQ1 acts as the overarching question that sets the scene for the phenomenon I investigate. In RQ1, ‘construction’ does not refer to how the construction of a diverse workforce leads to effects on employees in the organization (for example, how the accentuation of certain workforce characteristics can increase employee performance); rather, it refers to how a diverse workforce is itself constructed and represented by organizational actors (for example, which workforce characteristics are stressed and why).

I address RQ1 by investigating RQ2 and RQ3, and these two questions can therefore be thought of as sub-questions to RQ1. However, rather than referring to these as sub-questions I have decided to stay with the notions of ‘first-, second-, third- and fourth-order’ used by Alvesson and Sandberg (2013). After having addressed RQ1 (through RQ2 and RQ3) I turn normative in addressing RQ4. In the final chapter of this dissertation I build on the analytical findings and on the discussions resulting from addressing RQ1-3.

I will, in the forthcoming pages unfold RQ2, RQ3, and RQ4. However, before doing so I will illustrate the relationship between RQ1 and the four academic journal papers on which this dissertation resides (see figure 1). These papers are referred to as *article 1-4*. **Note:** *Each paper explores specific research questions that are different from the four research questions, as they are each constructed to fit according to other requirements (such as editor/reviewer opinions and/or specific ways of framing research questions in journals or in research fields).*

- **Article 1**, included as a part of “Chapter 2: Theory and Methodology”, develops a methodological framework for the study of social categorization, taking its point of departure in four key tensions that make up contemporary intersectional literature.
- **Article 2**, included as part of “Chapter 4: Analysis Part 1”, applies this method to the empirical setting in order to study how practitioners in PharmaTech categorize the workforce into specific employee categories. Here, employee categories are investigated, showing how they enable a representation of the workforce as clear-cut demarcations.
- **Article 3**, included as part of “Chapter 5: Analysis Part 2”, draws inspiration from an alternative theoretical concept, boundary objects, to explain how practitioners re-represent the organizational workforce as narratives, thus leaving behind the employee categories that they had developed earlier on. While article 2 shows how employee categories *emerge* and become dominant, article 3 shows how these categories diffuse, become hidden and are eventually left behind. Article 2 and 3 apply different theoretical concepts to the case to nuance the role of different representations of workforce diversity.
- **Article 4**, the final paper included as part of “Chapter 6: Analysis Part 3”, takes a broader contextual perspective on the project and shows how shifting representations of the workforce are shaped by organizational politics and the striving for economic resources.

**Figure 1:** The relationship between the four papers, their respective research questions and RQ1.



Reflecting on the findings in article 2 and article 3, I compare and discuss the different representations of ‘a diverse workforce’ that each article accentuates. More concretely, I apply an intersectional perspective (article 2) and a boundary object perspective (article 3), thereby exploring how different representations of a diverse workforce occurs. In doing so, the dissertation turns to the second research (RQ2): *What differences exist between organizational representations of ‘a diverse workforce’?* In addressing this research question I create a ‘comparative analysis’ (Alvesson and Sandberg, 2013, p. 16) by generating knowledge about how different representations of the phenomenon relate to each other (how they are similar/different to each other).

Article 4 explores the conditions leading to the differences in organizational representations of ‘a diverse workforce’. Here I seek explanation and causality for the way the phenomenon is constructed by exploring the third ‘explanatory’ research question (RQ3): *What are the main contextual factors influencing the construction of a diverse workforce?* (see also Alvesson and Sandberg, 2013, p. 16) In doing so I pay attention to how some of the earliest premises lead to changes in the construction of the phenomenon.

Table 1 below summarizes the different theoretical perspectives applied in the three *empirical* papers (articles 2, 3 and 4).

**Table 1:** The theoretical perspectives of the three empirical articles.

	<b>Article 2 - Intersectionality</b>	<b>Article 3 - Boundary concepts</b>	<b>Article 4 - Contextual dynamics</b>
<b>What are the empirical objects of investigation?</b>	<b>What is studied?</b> The emergence of dominant employee categories (early representation of the workforce)	<b>What is studied?</b> The translation of the workforce into persona narratives (late representation of the workforce)	<b>What is studied?</b> The power and politics that influence the representation of the workforce through all phases (early and late)
<b>What are the key interests of this theoretical perspective?</b>	Conceptualization of categories, differences in the workforce	Representation, assemblages, collaboration between communities	Critical contextual diversity, power, politics, negotiation

Finally, led by the ‘normative’ research question (RQ4): *How can the findings in the analysis advance workforce diversity research and help overcome practical challenges to managing diverse workforces?* (see also Alvesson and Sandberg, 2013, p. 16), I suggest how

one could use the lessons learned in this dissertation when engaged with the phenomenon a 'diverse workforce' - both as a practitioner and as a scholar.

## **Why study the construction of 'a diverse workforce'?**

Before presenting the empirical case and discussing its relevance for this study, I will situate the contribution in contemporary workforce diversity research and argue for why this study is relevant theoretically. In 1987 the Hudson Institute<sup>1</sup> released the influential report *Workforce 2000* (Johnson and Packer, 1987). The Workforce 2000 report was central to the rise of *diversity management* in the mid- to late-1980s (Lorbeicki and Jack, 2000). In part, diversity management was a welcoming alternative to affirmative action regulations, as the then ruling president, Ronald Regan, and his administration were not only “lacking the will to enforce affirmative action beyond rubber-stamped compliance reviews [resulting] in an affirmative action programs without practical effects since 1980” (Leonard, 1989, p. 74), but also proposing regulatory changes to dismantle the existing system of enforcing affirmative action initiatives (Kelly and Dobbin, 1998). The impactful scientific management trend, particularly popular during the 1910s and 1920s (also known as Taylorism), held the view that some workers – the proletariat – were less intelligent ‘draft animals’ (Taylor, 1911). The rise of diversity management can be seen as a late development of the human relations school in which the recognition of individual and collective differences pointed to the heterogeneity and complexity of the workforce, rather than paying tribute to the similarities, homogeneity and simplification of the workforce. In the years that followed, diversity management gathered momentum as a topic of increasing interest, both to policy makers and beyond. Diversity studies soon developed into a broad and multidirectional field of research that included several, sometimes opposing, approaches to understanding differences. However, throughout this process scholars noted that several diversity management initiatives regarding diversity as a resource often backfired and resulted in antagonism (Gordon, 1995; Johnson, 2006). Attempts to overcome diversity issues sometimes ended up provoking and reconstituting the very problem they strived to address. One of the reasons for this lies in the way differences and similarities were perceived as

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<sup>1</sup> The Hudson Institute “seeks to guide public policy makers and global leaders in government and business through a vigorous program of publications, conferences, policy briefings, and recommendations” (see [hudson.org/about](http://hudson.org/about) – accessed on October 7<sup>th</sup>, 2015).



fundamentally fixed categories that were naturally embedded in the structure of organizations (Steyaert and Janssen, 2003; Czarniawska, 2008).

The Workforce 2000 report provided forecasts of demographic change in the US workforce and pointed to six central issues that US policy makers and leaders should pay attention to as the twentieth century was coming to an end. These six issues were: 1) promoting world growth; 2) boosting service industry productivity; 3) stimulating a more flexible workforce; 4) providing for the needs of working families with children; 5) bringing minority workers into the workforce; and 6) improving workers education and skills. These central issues, and in particular ‘stimulating a more flexible workforce’ and ‘bringing minority workers into the workforce’, pointed to the mindset that would serve as the foundation for the report. In the report, the workforce takes the form of an object undergoing changes, but also an object in need of *stimulation* and *improvement*. According to this view, the workforce adopts the status of being both a pre-determined notion but also a moldable object. The workforce is then changing due to demographical transformations and is simultaneously open to reworking, for example, via political actions. Such a predetermined notion of the workforce as an object in need of stimulation is not atypical for the field of workforce diversity (Tatli and Özbilgin, 2012b).

Ten years later, in 1997, the Hudson Institute released the follow up report, *Workforce 2020*. Again the report presented a list of central issues that policy makers and leaders should pay attention to, as the world was approaching the year 2020. The new report described how the workforce was influenced by technology, globalization, increased life expectancy and ethnic diversification. Similar to the previous report, the assumptions made in order to ‘construct the workforce’ as an object in need of improvement were not explicated. What historical and practical conditions have given birth to the definition of the workforce in these reports? When conceiving of the workforce as a set of people engaged in or available for work, how we define ‘being engaged in or available for work’ is crucial. Here diversity studies and the notion of a ‘diverse workforce’ become particularly relevant when seeking answers to this question. Moreover, it is equally important how the ‘diverse workforce’ is put into practice as a tool used to describe certain organizational and societal circumstances. The concept of a diverse workforce, studied widely under the umbrella term ‘workforce diversity’, holds the promise of actively addressing what the workforce entails – both conceptually and in practice. However, while much workforce diversity research has studied how to manage the increases in ‘differences in the workforce’ (in the many facets of the phenomenon ‘differences’), workforce diversity is still predominantly understood as a pre-determined notion that transcends time and

place (Tatli and Özbilgin, 2012b). Thus, while research in diversity and its management evolved into a prosperous and vivid field of research, the concept of the workforce, which was foundational to the field, seemed to slip into the background.

In the decades that followed, and building on early workforce diversity research, the field became polarized into the popular notions of ‘business case diversity research’ and ‘critical diversity research’ (Lorbecki and Jack, 2000; Tatli, 2011). While ‘business case diversity research’ paid particular attention to the economic profitability of exploiting a more diverse workforce, as the name indicates (Richard and Miller, 2013), much critical diversity research pointed to the issues of constructing and measuring differences (Zanoni et al., 2010). The meaning of *diversity* then became the central battlefield on which opposing forces were either seeking to make a case for the relevance of workforce diversity in organizations or to oppose a sometimes simplistic and essentialist view of people’s differences in organizations. In a recent study, Ahonen et al. (2014) note how these two positions, critical diversity research and business case diversity management, though oppositional, shared some central characteristics: “[T]he diversity that critical scholarship produces in terms of governmentality is not very far from the diversity that mainstream diversity research in management produces; diversity is still [in either case] something that can and even should be managed to achieve desirable ends” (Ahonen et al., 2014, p. 16).

Workforce diversity has been widely debated in the last three decades, and while the Workforce 2000 report was a stepping-stone for the coining of the research field, this field of research does not hold clear boundaries but rather shares characteristics with, and is sometimes conflated with, other fields, such as ‘diversity in the workplace’ (O’Brien and Gilbert, 2013 (in Roberson, 2013); Jackson, 1992; Konrad et al., 2006), ‘diversity at work’ (Roberson, 2013; Brief, 2008) and ‘diversity management’ (Lorbecki and Jack, 2000; Barak, 2005; Robinson, 2009). A substantial amount of critical diversity research places a broader focus on systemic, structural or societal issues of oppression and marginalization beyond work related situations. However, critical diversity research also engages in debates around workforce diversity (Boogaard and Roggeband, 2010; Zanoni, 2011), and it therefore seems that there has been an inadvertent gliding between critical diversity research, diversity studies in the broader sense, work-related diversity studies, and what I call *workforce diversity* studies. Cox (1994) pointed to this issue when noting that, “when the word diversity is used, an assumption is made that the topic is workforce diversity”. While this is true in many cases, the opposite is also the case, namely, that diversity is in many cases studied beyond workforce diversity (Zanoni et al., 2010).

What is common, however, among these varied fields of research is the central focus on the *diversity problematic* that reduces workforce diversity to the study of differences among people in the workforce. While workforce diversity research has contributed to a better understanding of the concept of diversity in work-related situations, the role of ‘workforce’ in this equation is often assumed, reducing the problematic of workforce diversity to a need to understand the concept of ‘diversity in the workforce’. However, I argue that this perception is not without problems and has led to a focus on the concept of diversity at the expense of understanding the role of the workforce as something else than a simple container of ‘people engaged in or available for work’ (Stevenson and Lindberg, 2010). And so, even though the *workforce* was foundational to the coining of workforce diversity and its related fields (such as diversity management, diversity at work, diversity in the workplace, etc.), discussions about the role of the workforce has become a peripheral debate, while discussions on the role of diversity has become central. Table 2 below gives examples of scholars attending to and reviewing the concept of workforce diversity. Tracing the central questions that these articles raise in comparison to the answers they provide points to the inadvertent gliding between work-related diversity studies on the one hand and the concept of *diversity* on the other:

**Table 1:** Inadvertent gliding between ‘workforce diversity’ and ‘diversity’ more broadly / how the ‘workforce’ becomes peripheral and ‘diversity’ central.

Authors	Questions / problems raised	Answers provided
	<p><i>Notice how ‘workforce diversity’ appears central when questions are raised.</i></p>	<p><i>In the examples below, notice either;</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- <i>an inadvertent gliding between ‘workforce diversity’ and ‘diversity’ more broadly</i></li> <li>- <i>or how ‘the workforce’ diffuses and becomes peripheral</i></li> </ul>
Richard & Miller, 2013	<p>“What are the organizational performance effects of <b>workforce diversity</b>, especially the visible attribute dimensions?” (p. 240)</p> <p>“What are the strategic and human resource management practices that managers can implement to maximize the positive effects of diversity while minimizing the potential negative effects?” (p. 240)</p>	<p>“In the new global age, <b>workforce diversity</b> has become widespread, drawing attention to not only previous studied dimensions of diversity such as functional background, educational background, and tenure, but also more salient workforce diversity features such as national culture, race, gender, and age. This chapter[‘s] .. major thrust is how more salient, visible dimensions of diversity affect organizational processes and ultimately firm performance.” (p. 239)</p> <p>- <i>Workforce diversity studied as diversity dimensions</i></p>
Tatli &	<p>“How do <b>workforce diversity</b> studies that</p>	<p>“In answering this question, we paid particular</p>

Özbilgin, 2012a	are published in business and management journals treat diversity?" (p. 182)	attention to (1) which diversity strands are included in these studies; and (2) in what ways and to what extent multiple diversity categories are covered in a single study." (p. 182)  - <i>Workforce diversity studied as diversity dimensions</i>
Jonsen et al., 2013	"We identify two dilemmas that underscore the social tragedy of diversity and explain why they prevent <b>workforce diversity</b> from progressing: (1) voluntarism and (2) individualism." (p. 271)	"We critique the simplistic models of managing diversity and suggest an alternative conceptualization as a way forward. A reframing of organizational self-interest and collective interests in the context of <b>diversity</b> is presented and solutions to social tragedy of diversity are proposed." (p. 271)  - <i>Workforce diversity studied as interests in the context of diversity</i>
Jonsen et al., 2011	"This paper reviews <b>workforce diversity</b> literature and its research findings. We identify important gaps between the literature and the challenges of diversity management." (p. 35)	"We conclude that the <b>diversity</b> field itself is not very diverse and has been dominated by US-centric research." (p. 35)  - <i>An inadvertent gliding between the workforce diversity field and the diversity field</i>
Alcazar et al., 2013	" <b>Workforce diversity</b> is considered one of the main challenges for human resource management in modern organizations. Despite its strategic importance, the majority of models in this field implicitly consider workforce as a generic and homogeneous category, and do not take into account cultural differences among employees" (p. 39)	"The paper identifies four research questions that still need to be addressed: deeper analysis of the concept of diversity, introduction of psychological processes mediating the diversity-performance relationship, development of diversity oriented SHRM [strategic human resource management] typologies and redefinition of performance indicators to measure the effects of diversity." (p. 39)  - <i>While the 'workforce' is recognized as a homogeneous and implicit category within workforce diversity, the solution is to call for a deeper analysis of the concept of <b>diversity</b></i>
Mighty, 1991	"This paper describes the real and perceived impact of increasing workforce diversity on organizations and various management approaches to dealing with the phenomenon." (p. 64)	"It proposes a model of management that values <b>diversity</b> and seeks to reduce the negative consequences that may arise from conflicting racial and cultural interactions, while simultaneously seeking to maximize its potential benefits." (p. 64)  - <i>Workforce diversity studied as diversity dimensions (race and culture)</i>

In summary, the literature on workforce diversity can be categorized as paying attention to the following central issues:

- Whether diversity in the workforce contributes to organizational prosperity (for example, increased organizational performance) (e.g. Richard and Miller, 2013; Alcazar et al., 2013)?
- What diversity entails (for example, which attributes/social identity categories, if any, are relevant to focus on?) (e.g. Tatli and Özbilgin, 2012a; Jonsen et al., 2013; Jonsen et al., 2011; Alcazar et al., 2013; Omanowich, 2009)?
- How groups within the workforce gain influence and overcome marginalization and oppression (e.g. Tatli and Özbilgin, 2012a)?

These three central issues, as well as the examples presented in Table 2, point to the inadvertent gliding between diversity more broadly and workforce diversity, and how issues around diversity have taken center stage. While the studies presented in Table 2 contribute to workforce diversity research, they simultaneously pay most attention to: visible dimensions of diversity (Richard and Miller, 2013); how the concept of diversity is treated in workforce diversity (Tatli and Özbilgin, 2012a); interests in the context of diversity (Jonsen et al., 2013); the state of the diversity field more broadly, though initially arguing for a discussion around workforce diversity (Jonsen et al., 2011); and the need for a “deeper analysis of diversity” (Alcazar et al., 2013, p. 39). This implies that the concept of the *workforce* has become a peripheral debate, either as an implicit discussion or by taking it for granted as an infrastructural part of what is being studied. Omanovic (2009) notes how diversity and its management are dialectic processes and are mediated by socio-historical relationships that reflect their ongoing productions. In a similar vein, the concept of workforce diversity is continuously produced and subjected to its socio-historical trajectory. For example, building on the Workforce 2000 report, there is a notable heritage of debating demographical projections and assuming ‘workforce diversity’ to be a predetermined notion. To advance workforce diversity research and explore alternate routes, there is a pertinent case for developing new ways of studying *workforce diversity*. The field of workforce diversity research could benefit from exploring alternative questions such as: How are workforce representations created? How do they evolve and possibly interact with other competing representations? How is the workforce (and workforce diversity) used as a tool to describe certain organizational circumstances? All of these questions can be summarized under the overall research question pursued in this dissertation (RQ1): *How is a diverse workforce constructed in an organizational setting?*

## **The empirical setting**

So far I have presented my early motivation for studying a diverse workforce, proposed four central research questions, and presented theoretical and practical reasons for why it is important to study this topic. In the following section, I will unfold in more detail the role of PharmaTech and clarify central assumptions and motivations for the Diverse and Global Workforce project (also referred to as the DGW project).

### ***PharmaTech and the Diverse and Global Workforce project***

PharmaTech is one of Scandinavia's largest biopharmaceutical companies. Of the 41.000 employees employed by the company, approximately 15.000 are employed in Scandinavia. The company has a history of heavy investment in R&D and has, within the last few decades, expanded its R&D research sites to include countries such as China, Brazil and the USA. While the company has a strong pipeline of future products, it is also heavily dependent on its main product. The company has therefore spent the last couple of years mapping its challenges and opportunities in order to ensure ongoing innovativeness both within, and beyond, core business areas. A consultancy report conducted in 2009 showed that innovation is overly centered on product performance and core processes and that exploratory market-facing innovations are mainly done in isolation without broader learning and implications across the organization. According to this report, not much innovation was occurring beyond R&D and production, two of PharmaTech's core business areas. The report concluded that PharmaTech should connect a small number of initiatives under the headline of innovation and pursue them in a coordinated fashion under the sponsorship of top management. According to the report, it is important that top management take a clear leadership role with these selected projects in order to attract the talent of the organization and set an expectation of openness to external inputs.

The DGW project was part of these 'small initiatives' – an exclusive group of projects selected by top management. The consultancy report then played an essential role leading up to the DGW project. Though PharmaTech receives a range of consultancy reports similar to the one discussed here, the target group of this report was PharmaTech's top management. Top management took actions to support the suggestions presented in the report and so the DGW project, one of five 'innovation projects', was backed by top management, thereby receiving substantial funding. The project had a budget of 1.5 million DKK in 2012 (excluding salaries for employees involved). The DGW project was situated in the global human resource management

(HRM) division of the company. However, in parallel with the global HRM division, the ‘Innovation Department’ was established as an independent satellite department and was to act as a secondary facilitator in order to guide these projects in an ‘innovative direction’. The five initiatives established based on the report were supervised by top management and thus received a great deal of attention in parts of the organization. In 2010 the establishment of the DGW project was emphasized in the company’s annual report. In a company as large as PharmaTech, several thousand projects are competing for a limited amount of attention and resources, and so being mentioned in the annual report as well as being supervised by top management drew attention to the DGW project.

This dissertation has closely followed the DGW project, from the time when I entered the organization until the time when the project was closed down. I aim to provide an emergent thick description and explanation of the unfolding content and the outcome leading to the conceptualization of a diverse workforce. As mentioned earlier, I experienced a conflict of views and opinions as to whether PharmaTech should adapt to its diverse workforce or whether the diverse workforce should be ‘formed’ to adapt to other agendas. Some believed that the organization should be able to accommodate employee differences, while others argued that knowing the differences within the workforce would help attract relevant people, and enable the organization to make informed decisions that would shape the workforce. Prior to my first official project day at PharmaTech, I was encouraged to read the book *Workforce of One* (Cantrell and Smith, 2010 – see also Smith and Cantrell, 2011) since Smith and Cantrell’s work, according to the project manager, would be inspirational to the DGW project. In an article later published on the topic of their book, they point to this conflict in their opening statement:

“Imagine an employer that molds to fit the employee, rather than demanding that the employee mold to fit it. Instead of operating under the assumption that most employees are the same, or that they should be reshaped until they are, this organization would instead treat each and every employee as a “workforce of one,” with unique needs, aspirations and preferences.” (Smith and Cantrell, 2011, p. 5)

While PharmaTech was planning to increase its workforce by several thousand people within the coming decade, this expansion was expected to happen predominantly outside Scandinavia, solidifying the company’s footprint as a globally expanding organization. The DGW project was set to address this change by questioning the way PharmaTech was already

approaching its workforce. I found the DGW project thought provoking, as it adopted an unconventional perspective: a sort of meta-perspective on how the global HRM division of PharmaTech – a department of approximately 300 employees – was approaching its workforce. The DGW project was seeking to understand how other departments within the global HRM branch approached the workforce and whether there was room for improvement in how this was done. And so, contrary to many HRM projects within the company, this project did not seek to provide HRM services (such as career- or stress counseling, drive performance management, talent attraction and recruitment, etc.), but rather sought to take a step back and reflect on the premises on which corporate HRM services were constructed in relation to PharmaTech’s workforce. In a prospective and forward-looking meeting, the project manager leading the DGW project presented the following assumptions, motivations and benefits on a PowerPoint slide on March 23<sup>rd</sup> 2012 (one week after I had started my PhD project):

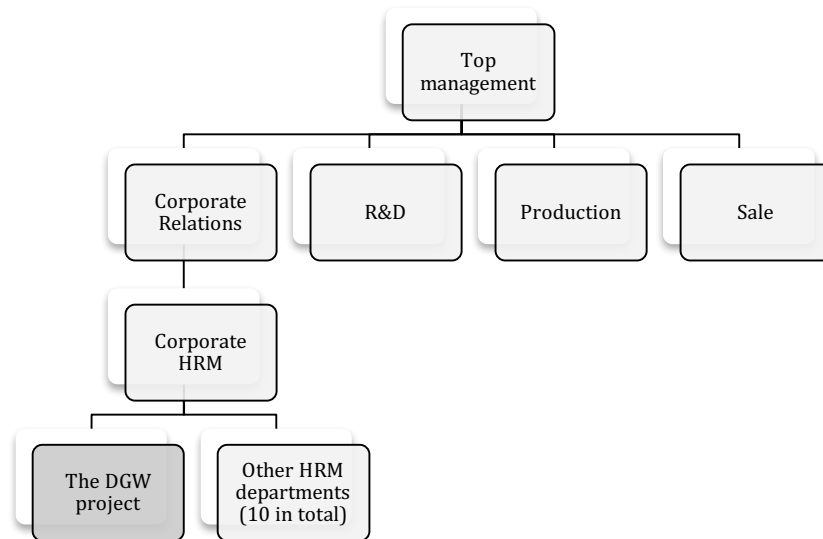
**Table 3:** Assumptions, motivations and benefits of the DGW project presented in March 2012.

Assumptions	Motivations and benefits
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Our workforce is becoming more diverse due to future growth, globalization and the increased age and generational composition</li> <li>- Customized people processes and HRM services to meet the needs of our respective employee segments will optimize performance, drive motivation and increase ability to work</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Tailoring solutions to better meet specific needs in our employee segments are in demand</li> <li>- Improving our ability to attract and retain the most talented employees</li> <li>- Increasing workforce performance and productivity</li> <li>- Flexibility to respond to current changes of employee preferences</li> </ul>

Figure 2 below places the DGW project in PharmaTech’s organogram. The project was situated three hierarchical layers below the CEO. Table 4 below lists employees affiliated with the DGW project. The project had a broad range of loose affiliations, adding up to more than 50 people being involved in the project at different times. Table 4 only presents the main actors involved. The two actors listed first and second in the table, Project Manager (also referred to as Team Member 1) and Team Member 2, were the two most heavily involved. Other people relevant to the project but less tightly coupled to the project are described when introduced later during the analysis.



**Figure 2:** The DGW project situated in the organizational hierarchy.



**Table 4:** Main employees involved in the DGW project.

<b>Position/Title</b>	<b>Time at PharmaTech</b>	<b>Age (approx.)</b>
Leia, Project Manager (Team Member 1)	2.5 years	45
Trevor, Team Member 2	2 years	30
Clara, Team member 3	5 years	45
Mikkel, (myself) Team Member 4	1 month	30
Luke, 1 <sup>st</sup> Department manager	8 years	45
Ken, Corporate manager	12 years	50
Gareth, Senior Vice President	20 years	55
Cameron, Executive Vice President	40 years	55

## Summary of the dissertation and the content of the chapters

So far I have explained my personal motivation, presented the four questions that comprise the central research focus, argued for why this dissertation is a relevant contribution to contemporary workforce diversity research, and unfolded the empirical setting. I will now conclude this chapter with a brief summary of the seven main chapters of this dissertation.

Chapter 1, which you are reading now, concerns the *introduction* of the field, the relevance of this dissertation, the research questions, and how this dissertation is structured. Chapter 2 presents the *theoretical and methodological* framework used to investigate the empirical setting. While some dissertations (perhaps the more conventional ones) discuss theory and methodology as two distinct chapters, I combine them as I believe, and will argue for later, that they are inextricably intertwined and there is value in debating them jointly. Chapter 3 presents the *strategy of analysis*, focusing on the epistemological standpoint from where I believe that ‘the world’ can be studied, how I have collected my empirical material, how this material has been analyzed, and how it is presented. Chapter 4 presents the first empirical article (article 2) showing how actors involved in the DGW project construct dominant employee categories in an attempt to conceptualize a diverse and global workforce. Chapter 5 presents the second empirical article (article 3), which starts where article 2 leaves off, by showing how these employee categories are instead re-represented as narratives, disguising the earlier dominant employee categories. Chapter 6 presents the third empirical article (article 4), applying a broader contextual perspective to the DGW project. Here I pay particular attention to how early negotiations and organizational politics influenced the DGW project, which necessarily also influenced the construction of a diverse workforce. Chapter 7 builds on the three empirical articles and discusses, based on the findings presented, how this may add to our understanding of the phenomenon ‘a diverse workforce’ and inspire new ways of discussing workforce diversity. In Chapter 7 I address the four research questions (RQ1-4). I compare the findings in article 2 and 3 to investigate the second research question (RQ2): *What differences exist between organizational representations of ‘a diverse workforce’?* Subsequently I use article 4 to explore the third research question (RQ3): *What are the main contextual factors influencing the construction of a diverse workforce?* I summarize RQ2 and RQ3 to address RQ1 and finally I build on the three empirical articles to discuss the fourth research question (RQ4): *How can the findings in the analysis advance workforce diversity research and help overcome practical challenges to managing diverse workforces?*

# CHAPTER 2: THEORY AND METHODOLOGY

## Theory of science

In this chapter, I discuss the theory and the methodology both of which serve as the basis for the methods used to collect the empirical material (the methods will subsequently be presented in detail in Chapter 3). I also discuss my belief that theory, methodology, and the empirical material co-construct each other (see also Alvesson and Kärreman, 2011; Alvesson and Sandberg, 2013). Therefore, this chapter does not present a sequential logic in elucidating my choices of theory and methodology, i.e. theory informed methodology, which informed methods, which shaped the empirical material. Instead, I present the curvy road that has led to the theoretical and methodological perspectives applied in this dissertation. At its most basic, this chapter addresses the fundamental question:

“How is the given version of the world constructed?” (Czarniawska, 2008a, p. 6)

By raising this question, I situate myself within the epistemological standpoint of *constructionism* (Czarniawska, 2008a; Cetina, 1994; Hacking, 1999; Berger and Luckmann, 1966). Constructionism is a multifaceted and contested concept (Hacking, 1999) but in broad terms can be said to point to the central assumption that people construct their own worlds. The perspective mimics what Rasborg (2005) refers to as ‘epistemological constructionism’ (contrary to ontological constructionism), pointing to my belief that the *realization* of the world is constructed (e.g. by a social context, by personal experiences and interpretation, as well as by the material and immaterial objects that surround us). This does not necessarily mean that no ‘real world’ exists independently of human knowledge of it, however, it does mean that this potentially ‘real world’ can never be proven by humans, as each of us will always be the subjective observer of this world (Czarniawska, 2008, p. 3).<sup>2</sup> Constructionism problematizes the positivistic ideal of truth, and thus questions the assumption that science should uncover the objective truth. In constructionism, the aspiration to uncover the truth is replaced by an aspiration to *construct* and legitimate, rather than validate, insights about the (social) world.

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<sup>2</sup> While I do not intend to engage in the more philosophical debate of whether the *object of realization* is in fact constructed too, a debate on this can be found in Rasborg’s (2005) discussion on ontological constructionism.

## *The genealogy of the sociology of classification*

The central topic studied in this dissertation, *a diverse workforce*, points to a particular interest that has guided my investigative lens. As described in the introduction in Chapter 1, I have paid particular attention to the way employees are categorized at PharmaTech in order to study how a diverse workforce is constructed. Studying the genealogy of categories and the classification systems<sup>3</sup> that they comprise can historically be traced back to one of the founding fathers of sociology, Emile Durkheim, in his study along with Marcel Mauss, titled *Primitive Classification* (Durkheim and Mauss, 1963). Durkheim and Mauss's book was foundational to the study of category derivation (Cetina, 1994), pointing to how classificatory systems are collective accomplishments. In their study, categories and the classificatory systems that they constitute become the central objects of investigation. Such an investigative lens, i.e. placing particular focus on the construction of categories and classifications, has later been referred to as the sociology of classification (Cetina, 1994; Bowker and Star, 1999). For Durkheim and Mauss, classifications were social projections. Contrary to a constructionist perspective, these scholars sought to prove that these classifications did not in fact originate from humans. They argued that the human mind did not have the capacity to classify the numerous things surrounding it spontaneously and out of necessity, but rather that society provided the model for this classification. In their well-known dissertation statement, they argue that “[t]he classification of things reproduces the classification of men” (Cetina, 1994, p. 9). Since the late 19<sup>th</sup> century and the publication of *Primitive Classification*, much research has paid attention to classification systems, and today multiple research fields address this topic. It is beyond the scope of this dissertation to provide a comprehensive account of the different areas of research that pay attention to the way humans classify and categorize. However, understanding some of the founding research of the sociology of classification helps us understand the premise of each of the two derivative research fields applied in this dissertation; namely, workforce diversity studies and research on social classification inspired by Science and Technology Studies (STS).

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<sup>3</sup> I distinguish between *classification* as the study of multiple categories and how they make up ‘systems’ (a broad perspective) and *categorization* as the study of single categories and their possible intersections with other constructed categories in their close proximity. See also Bowker and Star (1999) page 10 for a discussion on this issue.

## ***Symbolic interactionism and social identity categorization***

To study the construction of a diverse workforce, I pay particular attention to how people are categorized. Contrary to Durkheim and Mauss (1963) and much other later research that focuses on how people classify both things and humans, I pay attention to how people are categorized (sometimes by people, and sometimes by things!). While Durkheim and Mauss (1963) laid the foundations for the sociology of classification by studying how humans classify things, this dissertation adopts a more narrow anthropocentric perspective, in the sense that I study the way humans are categorized by actors (such as things and people) – more concretely, the way practitioners and other contextual factors classify organizational employees at PharmaTech. Again, within this more narrow focus, there are several significant classic contributions that focus on how people are categorized. This list includes, but is not limited to, Karl Marx's theorization on societal classes (Dahrendorf, 1959), Max Weber's three-component theory of stratification (Weber, 1978), Howard Becker's Labeling Theory (Becker, 2008), and Erwin Goffman's work on the management of identity (Goffman, 1959).

Goffman's work on symbolic interactionism is relevant in regard to my theoretical positioning. Similar to much of Goffman's work, I pay attention to the organizational praxis and concrete actions of actors in context-specific settings. Blumer (1969) highlights three propositions of symbolic interactionism, namely: 1) how humans act towards things on the basis of the meanings they ascribe to those things; 2) how the meaning of such things is derived from, or arises out of, the social interaction that one has with others and society; and 3) how these meanings are handled in, and modified through, an interpretative process done by the person in dealing with the things he or she encounters. These propositions can be reformulated to describe my interaction with the phenomenon that I study. Firstly, I investigate how humans act towards 'a diverse workforce' on the basis of the meanings they ascribe to this phenomenon. Second, the meaning of 'a diverse workforce' arises out of the social interaction that one has with others (these others can be both physical objects, social objects, and abstract concepts (Blumer, 1969 p. 10)). Third, the meaning of 'a diverse workforce' is modified through an interpretive process done by the person dealing with the things he or she encounters. Here interpretation comes in two stages: First, the interpretation of what 'a diverse workforce' means to my informants, and second, the interpretation that I make based on the interpretations of my informants, as well as actions invoked by non-human actors. As the analysis in this dissertation unfolds, my interest is not 'what really happened', but rather how actors negotiate distinct representations of a diverse

workforce (Mik-Meyer and Willadsen, 2009, p. 44). My research then originates in how situational circumstances and the actions of actors form the phenomenon that I study.

### ***The political situatedness of constructionist research***

Paying attention to the way actors negotiate representations rather than trying to validate reality points to how the production of scientific knowledge is socially constructed. In a constructionist view, knowledge relies on certain routines, rules, and regulations that invoke particular strengths and weaknesses. Findings based on constructionist qualitative research, such as the research presented in this dissertation, deliver a situated and detailed insight rather than generalizable truths (Lincoln and Guba, 1985). In such a perspective, knowledge production is not apolitical, but rather takes place in a political context in which informants, and the researcher himself, acts based on personal interests.

The different theoretical perspectives applied in each of the three empirical papers are a result of the way the empirical material, the methods, the theoretical concepts and my decisions about which stories to bring forward influence each other. As the case evolved, new theory enabled alternative interpretations of the events at PharmaTech, thus widening my understanding of the case and of the phenomenon under investigation. In my case, the ‘political situatedness’ was brought into the spotlight, as I started exploring the organizational politics in relation to the DGW project. In the later phases of the project, I started seeking personal accounts of the political struggles occurring among the central actors. Getting these personal stories required a certain degree of trust between the interviewees and myself. Surely, then, my empirical material is limited by being overrepresented by accounts of those I knew well and had a trusting relationship with. Moreover, I was influenced (and perhaps manipulated) by the very political struggles and intentions that I tried to portray. The stories told by my informants are not impartial but are rather influenced by each person’s own interpretations of the events that have taken place. All of these interpretations are products of the context in which the person acts (for example, his/her position at PharmaTech, whom he/she knows, what aspirations he/she has, and so on). By selecting and accentuating some of these stories consciously or unconsciously, I, along with my own interpretations of their stories, disseminate parts of their versions of the events into other settings such as in this dissertation, in academic journals, and to the wider PharmaTech audience. In this process, some of these stories become so well established that they come to shape my view on the events that have taken place, possibly informing my theoretical contributions, or inspiring new methods such as posing new questions or doing

observations differently. Such as process exemplifies how the knowledge that I have produced is situated, constructed and politically infused. The consequence of this approach to research is that the empirical material, theory, methodology and the methods it leads to, can all be said to co-construct each other – what is sometimes referred to as *abduction* (Reichertz, 2007).

### ***An abductive approach***

The central theme of this dissertation, the study of ‘a diverse workforce’, was not cut in stone from the beginning. Instead, it grew out of the material as the case evolved and in combination with my particular analytical strategy (presented in Chapter 3). Even though I had an early interest in studying social classification, I had little idea of what this would lead to. What made me decide on the central theme is a result of a multitude of contingent and coincidental circumstances as well as some more conscious decisions made by others and me. So how did I initially go about doing research without being sure what I was studying? Reichertz (2007) points to such a situation in noting that when “[s]omething unintelligible is discovered in the data [...] and it becomes clear what the case is” (p. 16). My strategy of analysis follows this abductive approach, as no answers were given before hand (I guess they are never given before hand). Early on I was inspired by Alvesson and Kärreman’s notion of ‘breakdown sensitive’ research (Alvesson and Kärreman, 2011). Drawing on abductive reasoning, these scholars argue that “...it is possible to bracket this impulse to control – through measuring, codifying, checking, etc. – and instead to let a desire to become challenged, surprised, bewildered and confused to take center stage in research” (see also Alvesson and Kärreman, 2011 p. 40). Rather than focusing on a narrow topic and thereby setting a clear direction, for example, by proposing hypotheses, I aspired to ask myself: “What is going on here? And what do the ‘natives’ think?” (see also Alvesson and Kärreman, 2011, p. 68). Such an approach, however, is not without weaknesses. For example, contrary to some positivistic and/or deductive research, this approach gives little direction to the study (I sometimes asked myself if I would ever find focus, and if so, whether this focus would be the right one).

In a breakdown sensitive approach, the ‘surprising new’ is stressed at the expense of direction and control (for strategies to pursue the ‘surprising new’ see Figure 1, page 1271 in Alvesson and Kärreman, 2007). I did have ‘some direction’ in my research, as I started out by knowing that I would pay attention to ‘how people were categorized’. Studying the categorization of people, while seeking inspiration from the empirical setting, gave me a point of fixation, and at the same time staying open to ‘breakdowns’. A ‘breakdown’ refers to an

occurrence that does not sit well within your existing theoretical framework, thus calling for new ways to understand and interpret the material. In describing such a ‘breakdown situation’, the scholars draw on Karl Weick in noting that: “Whenever one reacts with the feeling, that’s interesting, that reaction is a clue that current experience has been tested against past experience and that the past understanding has been found inadequate” (Weick, 1989, p. 525; Alvesson and Kärreman, 2011, p. 58). Taking point of departure in this abductive and breakdown sensitive approach to my research, I will, in the following sections, concretize some of my choices and some of the influences I see as having shaped what I call ‘the curvy road’ to co-constructing theory, methodology and the empirical material.

## **The curvy road: On the co-construction of theory, methodology, and empirical material**

### *The early influence*

To understand the direction my early theoretical bias leaned towards at the beginning of my PhD project, I will give a brief introduction to my background. In 2008 I finished a Bachelor’s degree in nanotechnology at Copenhagen University with a specialization in bio-nanotechnology. This educational degree is a typical natural sciences degree where core subjects are mathematics, physics, chemistry and biology. Upon the completion of my Bachelor thesis, I decided to pursue a different line of education, specifically, a graduate degree in communications and management at Copenhagen Business School. As a result of my natural sciences Bachelor degree, I had at the time a view of research as being reliant on validity, accuracy and ‘hard numbers’ – the sort of objectivistic and positivistic thinking which assumes that we can reveal ‘facts out there’ by meticulously exploring information about nature and convert these into natural laws.

In 2009 I started my graduate degree within social sciences. What I remember most clearly were the frustrations I had in my early days of attending graduate classroom lectures. I had fierce debates with my teachers concerning the philosophy of science and how to conduct proper scientific research. Given that I came from a natural sciences background, my ontological and epistemological standpoint was very different from the views taught at these graduate lectures. Among the many topics I encountered along the way, I recall one specific topic that intrigued and provoked me more than the others. This topic, which I refer to as ‘diversity studies’, was in



many ways the furthest from what I had been taught in my previous degree. I was particularly intrigued by our classroom discussions around feminism, queer theory and the generally normative assumptions that tend to underlie much of critical diversity research (CDR) (Lorbeicki and Jack, 2000; Zanoni et al., 2010). What inspired me the most within this perspective were the efforts to leave behind dichotomous and rigid social identity categories based on essentialist notions. Critical diversity research situates itself against more mainstream diversity research as it “contest[s] the instrumental view of differences inherent to the diversity paradigm (Hoobler, 2005; Noon, 2007)” (Zanoni et al., 2010). At its core, this perspective holds a non-positivistic, anti-essentialist understanding of diversity as continuously produced by context-specific processes and is historically linked to queer theory and deconstructionism.

I soon shifted from an overwhelming reliance on my natural scientific and objectivistic background to assessing these perspectives in a critical light, increasingly adopting constructionist thinking. In the following years, I started working more with diversity research and in 2010 I embarked on a semester of studies in Melbourne, Australia, where I mainly focused on critical diversity studies (CDS) supervised by critical diversity scholar and professor Gavin Jack. This previous research experience within the field is one of the reasons why I possessed such a bias towards a CDS perspective early on in my PhD project. This bias is apparent in the way that CDS is the single most dominant theoretical perspective in the PhD project application, which I wrote back in 2011 and which attracted funding for my subsequent years of research.

However, as time passed and as I researched the literature in more depth, I started to become critical of central aspects of the field. Most importantly, some of the normative assumptions underlying much of the research within the field became problematic to me. CDS is particularly known for its critical position towards privilege and dominance (Lorbeicki and Jack, 2000; Prasad and Mills, 1997; Bond and Pyle, 2001). In recapping CDS, Zanoni et al. (2010) note how despite differences among critical approaches to diversity, they all explore the existing unequal power relations within a given context and strive to resist and/or transform them (Zanoni et al., 2010, p. 10). That is, CDS researchers often strive to bring forward the voice of marginalized and oppressed people. Furthermore, it is characteristic of such research to focus on a set of exclusive social identity categories – in particular gender, class and race (Fine and Burns, 2003). While I find the fight against oppression and the improvement of circumstances for marginalized peoples a very important and admirable endeavor, I have also experienced a sense of contradiction in the way CDS promotes this normative position, while partly

reinforcing the stereotypical social identity traits that they strive to fight – for example, by promoting research based on a set of exclusive categories.

I have increasingly adopted a stance at the periphery of CDS in which I have ascribed to some but not all the conditions central to mainstream CDS. I was intrigued by the following ideas: 1) diversity as the study of any type of differences among people, 2) how these differences were analytical constructs rather than fixed and natural categories, and in particular 3) how the experience of any difference might be the result of the particular context. Moreover, I was intrigued by the idea that what might seem as oppression and privilege in one setting, could be experienced as the opposite in another setting. Rather than rely on conventional CDS research, I wanted to expand my insights into new theory, empirics and methods encountered over the years to come.

### ***Exploring multiple empirical perspectives***

Inspired by the promise of research in “favor of interesting, challenging and novel ideas” (see for example Alvesson and Kärreman, 2011, p. 75), I created what Reichertz refers to as an ‘abductive climate’ by adopting an “*attitude* of preparedness to abandon old convictions and to seek new ones” (Reichertz, 2007, p. 22). One way to construct such an abductive climate was to start mapping and categorizing multiple ways to view and interpret the empirical case. Besides keeping a logbook in which I wrote personal reflections, I also kept a ‘brainstorming document’ in which I wrote down different ways to conceptualize and interpret the case. Five months into the project, this document contained 61 different perspectives on the DGW project. The 61 perspectives portray my early efforts in search of breakdowns (Alvesson and Kärreman, 2011) – ideas on the case that would disrupt and challenge my initial understanding of the case. I started revisiting this brainstorming document on a regular basis. While many of these perspectives focused on topics far from the central theme of this dissertation, it became more and more clear to me that several of these perspectives could be aggregated under the overarching perspective ‘the construction of the workforce’. At the same time, I started to realize that a conflict among some of the central actors of the DGW project was on the horizon. It seemed that I could trace aspects of this conflict in the way employee categories were constructed. This early brainstorming process was the beginning of a long and curvy road towards the final product that you are reading now. As the project evolved, I explored multiple theoretical, methodological and empirical ways to comprehend the case.

In her discussion on how to make sense of evolving empirical material, Ann Langley (2009, p. 419) notes that an abductive approach is well suited as it offers a set of conditioning principles that might help stimulate the study of temporal changes. These principles include the ability to pursue and shape certain emerging ideas and the ability to amplify engagement with the empirical phenomenon by applying different theoretical perspectives. These principles mirror my own way of nuancing the phenomenon, ‘a diverse workforce’, by paying particular attention to how the case *changed*, and by amplifying certain interpretations of the phenomenon through the accentuation of some aspects of the case rather than others. Therefore, it is no coincidence that the three empirical papers included in this dissertation (Chapters 4 to 6) paint a picture of the DGW case and a diverse workforce as a temporal phenomenon undergoing continuous changes. Also, it is no coincidence that the three empirical papers represent different periods during the development of the DGW project and apply different theoretical perspectives to these periods.

### ***Exploring new theoretical perspectives***

Concurrent to my brainstorming on the multiple ways to view the empirical case, I started to explore new theory. Early on, at about the same time as I was writing up the brainstorming document, I had conversations with both Annette Risberg and Gavin Jack, in which I aired my concerns over the CDS perspective. I was searching for a perspective that placed central attention on the categorization of people while relying on an anti-essentialist theoretical stance, but also a perspective that would nuance the normative assumptions about privilege and oppression and increasingly see social identity categorization as an assemblage of non-fixed categories interacting with the local surroundings in which people were situated. Both of them independently pointed to the concept of intersectionality (McCall, 2005; Crenshaw, 1989) as a possible entrance to addressing my concern. In July 2012, I put aside about three months to do a comprehensive literature review of the field of intersectionality.

As it happened, I found intersectionality very suitable for addressing some of my concerns. Conveniently, I found that an intersectional analysis fitted well with some of my early empirical material. During the early stages of the DGW project, I noted how the two dominant categories that the practitioners developed seemed to complement each other. Intersectionality offered a suitable theoretical perspective to describe this observation, since such categorical entanglement is a central point within much intersectional research. Intersectionality departs in anti-essentialist assumptions and the perspective had, in my view, developed a valuable vocabulary

for describing the complex issue of how people are categorized. Furthermore, I had the chance to get close to, and be a part of, the DGW team during my years of involvement with PharmaTech. In similar ways, much intersectional research relies on detailed qualitative and ethnographic accounts, which also proved to be a common way of doing research at my academic institute (the Department of Organization (IOA) at CBS).

Intersectionality not only held some cherished overlaps with the CDS field, but also seemed aligned with 1) my early insights of the DGW case, 2) my search for an alternative to more mainstream CDS, 3) the type of empirical access I had, and 4) the way my co-workers at the university did research. Intersectionality became the central theoretical perspective for my earliest research. And by taking center stage, intersectionality also had an influence on my later theoretical choices. In other words, the theoretical repertoire that I had developed early on shaped the decisions about which theories to include later on. Adopting an intersectional perspective meant focusing on the categorization of people. With this focus, I locked my gaze onto activities related to social categorization, and I was therefore more likely to accentuate these activities in my research and build findings that discussed and expanded aspects of this particular view – leaving out other equally relevant interpretations of the empirical material on the way. Moreover, I adopted an ambivalent stance on the categories that I have investigated since I constructed categories as stable concepts for analytical purposes, while assuming an anti-essentialist view on these categories. I touch more upon this problem in the article below, but at this point I want to assert that there is an inherent paradox in “the anti-essentialist aspects of all organizing (organizing never stops) and its apparently solid effects (for a moment things seem unchangeable and organized for good)” (Czarniawska, 2004, p. 780). That is, in adhering to an anti-essentialist perspective on categories, while studying these analytically, I have been forced to consider the following question: Do I reproduce essentialist notions by stabilizing and demarcating categories for analytical purposes, which I otherwise do not see as essential objects? Also, given this ambivalent stance, I have needed to be careful not to adopt an overly categorical view on the categories developed in praxis, as this is against the very intention of the intersectional framework that I have applied. Lastly, intersectionality emphasizes the role of context when studying social identity categorization. By adopting an intersectional perspective, I acknowledge the influence that PharmaTech and its employees have had on the categorization process. In paying attention to employees influence, there is a risk of ascribing too much influence to these ‘obvious’ actors in close contextual proximity, rather than ‘hidden’ or ‘infrastructural’ actors, when analyzing categorization.

The importance of intersectionality in providing an early direction for my choice of theory should not be underestimated. I will therefore, in the article presented on the forthcoming pages, spend some time developing my personal stance within this field. As the reader will learn, mainstream intersectional theory is closely linked to CDS and, again, I adopt a somewhat unconventional stance within intersectionality to address some of my concerns with CDS and intersectionality.

## **Perspective 1: Intersectionality**

- Article 1 -

### **Grounded intersectionality: Key tensions, a methodological framework, and implications for diversity research**

(Author: Mikkel Marfelt)

#### **Abstract**

**Purpose:** This article builds on contemporary intersectional literature to develop a grounded methodological framework for the study of social differences.

**Design/methodology/approach:** A systematic literature review serves as the foundation for a discussion of the challenges associated with intersectional research. The findings assist in positioning the proposed methodological framework within recent intersectional debates.

**Findings:** The review shows a rise in intersectional publications since the birth of the “intersectionality” term in 1989. Moreover, the paper points to four tensions within the field: a tension between looking at or beyond oppression; a tension between structural-oriented and process-oriented perspectives; an apparent incommensurability among the macro, meso, and micro levels of analysis; and a lack of coherent methodology.

**Research implications:** On the basis of the highlighted tensions in contemporary research as well as the limitations of that research, the article presents a methodological framework and a discussion of the implications of that framework for the wider diversity literature.

**Practical implications:** The article suggests a need for an empirically grounded approach to studying social differences, which would not only create an opportunity to reassess common assumptions but also open up for explorations beyond conventional identity theorizations.

**Originality/value:** The framework departs from traditional (critical) diversity scholarship, as it is process oriented but still emphasizes stable concepts. Moreover, it does not give primacy to oppression. Finally, it adopts a critical stance on the nature of the macro, meso, and micro levels as dominant analytical perspectives. As a result, this paper focuses on the importance of intersectionality as a conceptual tool for exploring social differences.

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## ***Introduction***

In this paper, I investigate how intersectionality can be advanced as a grounded methodological framework, and I discuss the implications of that framework for diversity studies (Roberson, 2013). Like many other social phenomena, diversity is mediated by socio-historical relationships that reflect its ongoing production (Omanovic, 2009). Researchers studying diversity have recently argued that in order to adequately capture and examine the effects of multiple identities, “more research utilizing multidimensional conceptualizations of diversity is needed” (Roberson, 2013, p. 462). “Intersectionality” serves as one such multidimensional conceptualization of diversity. In fact, the number of studies at the crossroads between diversity and intersectionality has increased substantially in recent years, highlighting the relevance of a discussion of how intersectionality can inform diversity studies and other social phenomena (Walby *et al.*, 2012).

The concept of “intersectionality” arose from critical race theory. The term was initially coined in attempts to critically assess the relationship between gender and race (Crenshaw, 1989). Intersectionality is therefore closely tied to critical diversity research, as it contests “the instrumental view of differences inherent to the [non-critical] diversity paradigm” (Zanoni *et al.*, 2010, p. 10). At their cores, intersectionality and critical diversity research share a non-positivistic, non-essentialist understanding of differences among people as produced in ongoing, context-specific social processes (Zanoni *et al.*, 2010). Although intersectionality and diversity are sometimes viewed as separate fields of research, this paper emphasizes the close ties between the two. I adopt a view similar to that of Metcalfe and Woodhams (2012), as I note that the emergence of intersectionality represents a significant “moment” at which the orientation of scholarship within the field shifted to “facilitate[e] a multidimensional approach to unraveling difference” (Metcalfe and Woodhams, 2012, p. 127).

In this paper I offer a systematic literature review that departs from the crossroads of intersectionality and diversity research. To avoid the risk of gliding between the two concepts and to pay tribute to historical roots that laid the foundation for the methodological framework proposed here, this paper primarily focuses on intersectionality. In particular, I highlight four tensions. First, a tension associated with either *looking at* or *beyond oppression*, as some recent studies depart from the political normative historical roots of intersectionality. Second, I show how objections to the commonly used characterization of identity categories as “fluid” relate to a more fundamental tension between *structural-oriented* and *process-oriented perspectives*.

Third, by showing that scholars emphasize different levels of analysis, I point to *the apparent incommensurability among different levels of analysis* in intersectionality. These three tensions provide a basis for addressing the fourth tension – the *lack of a coherent methodology* – and for proposing a framework that widens the applicability of intersectionality.

Intersectional research faces an inherent paradox – it must deal with the complexity that follows from the acknowledgement of multiple-axis interactions (Acker, 2012; McCall, 2005). Moreover, intersectionality is a vaguely defined concept (Bowleg, 2008; Choo and Ferree, 2010; Dhamoon, 2011; Kerner, 2012) in a multidisciplinary field that itself lacks a defined methodology (Nash, 2008). Recently, researchers have put a focus on this methodological impasse calling for new studies (Clycq, 2012; Cole, 2009; Nash, 2008; Zannoni *et al.*, 2010) that enable the potential deployment of intersectionality into a wider range of social phenomena (Yuval-Davis, 2011; Walby *et al.*, 2012). I build on contemporary theorizations of intersectionality to respond to this call. More specifically, I suggest that research could benefit from an empirically grounded methodology that does not give primacy to oppression, that recognizes fluidity and stability as co-existing concepts, and that relies on actions as the primary analytical starting point rather than a priori adopting a macro-, meso-, or micro-analytical perspective. In order to pay tribute to the close ties between intersectionality and diversity, I also link the proposed methodological framework to diversity research, and I discuss the implications of its adoption for the study of social differences more broadly.

### ***The evolution of intersectionality***

The term “intersectionality” was introduced by Crenshaw (1989), who uses a metaphor of intersecting roads to explain how gender and racial discrimination intersect in a multiple-axis framework. She argues that “a focus on either race or sex ... subsequently fail[s] to consider how marginalized women are vulnerable to both grounds of discrimination; thus, even a combination of studies about women and studies about race often [erase] the experiences of black women” (Dhamoon, 2011, p. 231). Crenshaw’s work, which resides in the feminist discussion of intersecting oppressions, has set the agenda for most studies of intersectionality (e.g. Purdie-Vaughns and Eibach, 2008; Bagilhole, 2010).

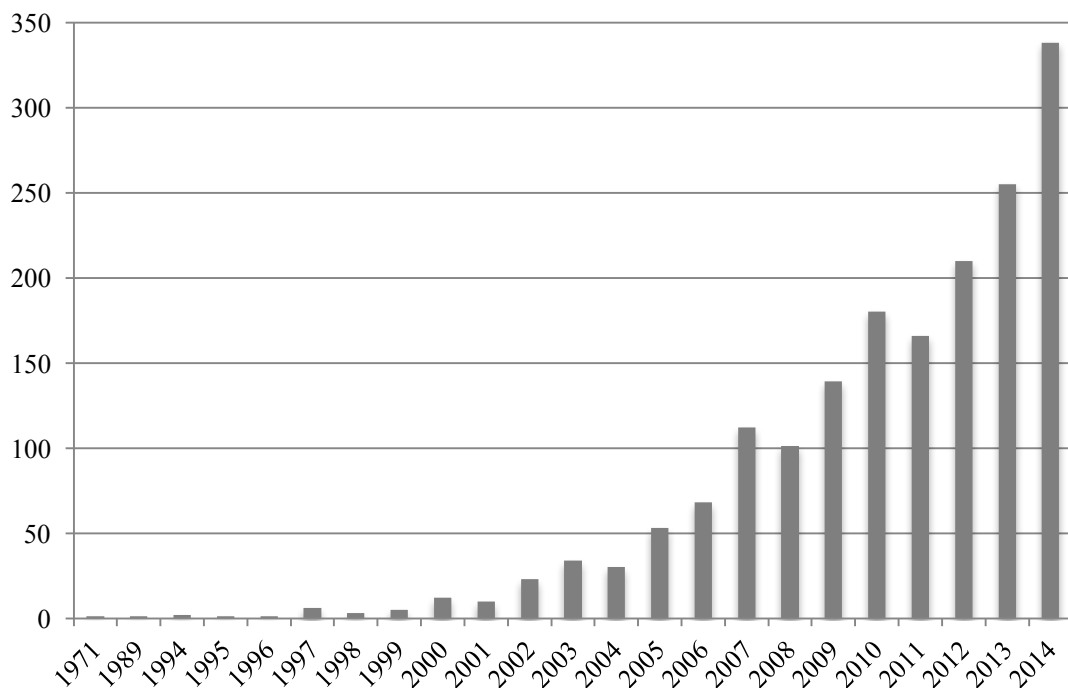
Although *intersectionality* was coined by Crenshaw, the implied concept goes back much further in time than popular perceptions might suggest. For instance, Prins (2006) argues that Crenshaw’s intersectionality term was a refreshing re-articulation of an insight previously presented by such scholars as Davis (1981) and Lorde (1984). Some scholars even suggest that



the origins of intersectional thought date back to the nineteenth century Black American freedom movements (Eriksson-Zetterquist and Styhre, 2007). Therefore, even though intersectionality has been praised as feminism’s greatest theoretical contribution to date (McCall, 2005; Nash, 2008; Gopaldas *et al.*, 2009; Bilge, 2010; Yuval-Davis, 2011), the concept has been lingering in the background for some time (Chhachhi, 2006; Jones, 2010).

The focus on intersectionality has increased significantly in recent years (see Figure 1). In fact, nearly 1,000 articles were published on the subject between 2011 and 2014, solidifying intersectionality as a concept on the rise within the diversity field. However, the concept has evolved beyond its initial origins to become a multifaceted concept that is “widely used in fields of social science” (Özbilgin *et al.*, 2011, p. 185). Intersectionality has even evolved to the point of being explicitly addressed beyond academia by, for example, research and advisory groups (Catalyst, 2010) in various political forums (Healy *et al.*, 2006; Gardiner, 2010). It has also made its way into the UN Commission on Human Rights, which included the term in the first paragraph of the resolution on the human rights of women (Yuval-Davis, 2006).

**Figure 1:** Number of publications per year addressing “intersectional\*” and “diversity” as keywords. In Business Source Complete, the search queries were “intersectional\*” AND “diversity” filtered by 1) subject terms OR 2) abstracts OR 3) author supplied keywords. In SAGE, the search queries were “intersectional\*” AND “diversity” with no filtering, although the search was confined to studies in the humanities and the social sciences.



As intersectionality has become a multifaceted, open-ended concept, scholars tend to emphasize various elements as central to the concept. Therefore, an understanding of the historical roots of intersectionality is important for understanding why some elements of the concept have been prioritized at the expense of others. In one of her earliest articles on the topic, Crenshaw notes that:

Intersectionality [is] a provisional concept linking contemporary politics with postmodern theory... By tracing the categories to their intersections, I hope to suggest a methodology that will ultimately disrupt the tendencies to see race and gender as exclusive or separable. (Crenshaw, 1991, p. 1244)

This quote points to the multiple purposes of intersectionality. For some, this open-endedness and vagueness are the secrets to its success (Davis, 2008; Kerner, 2012). For example, the concept links postmodern theory to contemporary politics by suggesting a methodology that addresses dominant assumptions from a critical and normative standpoint. Crenshaw also argues that intersectionality should “unveil the processes of subordination and the various ways those processes are experienced by people” by moving structural and representational intersectionality into the foreground (Crenshaw, 1991, p. 1297; see also Cho *et al.*, 2013)

### ***Key tensions within the literature***

#### **Tension 1: Looking at or beyond oppression**

Intersectionality research encompasses two streams. In the first, scholars view intersectionality as confined to the study of various forms of oppression (Collins, 1991; Denis, 2008; Cole, 2009; Bagilhole, 2010). In the second, scholars regard intersectionality as extending beyond the study of oppression (Yuval-Davis, 2006, 2011; Eriksson-Zetterquist and Styhre, 2007; Zander *et al.*, 2010; Shields and Diccio, 2011; Prasad, 2012; Clycq, 2012). This distinction is significant, as the first approach centers on oppression and marginalization, while the latter allows for a broader use of the concept.

While intersectionality has historically resided in feminist thinking and the struggle against oppression (Purdie-Vaughns and Eibach, 2008), some recent studies have downplayed the political dimension in their use of the intersectional framework (see, e.g. Johansson, 2007; Zander *et al.*, 2010; Buell *et al.*, 2010; Banton, 2011; Christensen and Jensen, 2012). Ryan and

Martin (2013) note a rising tendency to separate the political and methodological dimensions by appealing to an ideological or normative level of analysis and corresponding methodologies. For example, Zander *et al.* (2010) argue: “It is important to remember that the term ‘intersectionality’ refers to both a theoretical argument (often normative) and an approach to conducting empirical research that emphasizes the interaction of categories of differences” (p. 459). While recognizing the historical roots of the term, Zander *et al.* (2010) distinguish between the normative (political) level and the methodological level. Moreover, whereas power and the oppression of minorities has been an inherent dimension in intersectionality research (see, e.g. Dickens, 2007; Cronin and King, 2010; Cockburn, 2012), Zander *et al.* argue that “intersectionality is not a theory of power, but an analytic tool and a perspective which can be used together with theories about power” (2010, p. 459). Similarly, Dhammon (2011) notes that intersectionality is not simply a normative-theoretical argument but also a research paradigm that can be applied to populations beyond those with intersecting marginalized identities. Recently, Clycq (2012) addressed this tension more specifically by drawing on Nash (2008) to argue that an intersectional approach to identities *cannot* be limited to the study of marginalized subjects, “as social identities always intersect with each other in a person and a dominant ethnic identity can go hand in hand with a dominated gender and/or class identity (Chen, 1999; Fowler, 2003)” (Clycq, 2012, p. 160). These scholars pay both conceptual and practical attention to the methodological opportunities found in mainstreaming intersectionality as a research paradigm.

Intersectionality advocates for the existence of both oppression and privilege depending on the context and the subject. What might seem like oppression in one setting can be experienced as privilege in another. Therefore, even oppression and privilege become contextual and relational. As Nash notes:

One ‘so what’ question that remains unexplored by intersectional theorists is the way in which privilege and oppression can be co-constituted on the subjective level. That is, while intersectionality purports to describe multiple marginalizations ... it neglects to describe the ways in which privilege and oppression intersect, informing each subject’s experiences (Nash, 2008, p. 12).

In this perspective, oppression and privilege are contextual and therefore never universal – a view that reflects a shift in the analytical center of attention in intersectional research from the politics of oppression toward other dimensions. As a result, the study of oppression may be sidetracked or even become a peripheral focal area.

## **Tension 2: The structure/process divide**

The tension between centering on oppression and expanding to areas outside oppression is key to the current state of research on intersectionality. Notably, however, the presence of other tensions in the literature makes the emergence of a broader consensus on the definition of intersectionality improbable in the near future. For example, Erikson-Zetterquist and Styhre (2007, p. 15) note that part of the popularity of intersectionality lies in the contemporary focus on processes – the tendency to prioritize how social order is constructed via interactions rather than how social order is predetermined by societal and institutional arrangements. Eriksson-Zetterquist and Styhre (2007) argue that although intersectionality draws on earlier thinking, one salient element of the term is the attention paid to the constant change in society and social elements. This focus on change was not only foundational to the historical fight against oppression but is also a key driver of the broader use of intersectionality today.

In many instances, processes are central to the study of intersectionality. However, although the field is populated with constructivist, processual, and post-structuralist elements, the literature also offers studies that strive to “contribute to intersectionality theory by incorporating structure and agency as mutually constitutive” (Boogaard and Roggeband, 2010, p. 54). This reveals another tension within the field – the dispute over whether *structure* or *process* is central to intersectional research. Walby *et al.* (2012) point to this divide, stating that “there is a tension between the use of stable concepts or whether the priority should be given to the use of fluid and changing ones” (p. 231). Along these lines, Walby *et al.* (2012) note how two central contributions to the intersectional literature – Hancock (2007) and McCall (2005) – advocate for fluidity and process or stabilization and structure, respectively. Prins (2006) adds a geographical dimension to this divide by suggesting that there are significant differences in the treatment of intersectionality on the two sides of the Atlantic. According to Prins, “the US approach foregrounds the impact of system or structure upon the formation of identities, whereas British scholars focus on the dynamic and relational aspects of social identity.” (2006, p. 279)

Nevertheless, some attempts have been made to bridge the structure/process divide. In some cases, “structure” and “essentialism” have been partly reintroduced into the conceptualization of identity categories as processual and fluid. For example, Tatli and Özbilgin (2012b) incorporate a structural Bourdieuan framework, stating “it is not our intention to suggest that traditional diversity strands such as race and ethnicity, or gender, are endlessly fluid and performative, or free from historical and structural baggage” (p. 196). Prasad (2012) argues

that post-structuralists have a timely opportunity to utilize “strategic essentialism” to engage with a broader academic community. Richardson (2007) argues that the focus on fluidity delimits our understanding of how gender and sexuality intersect, as it does not pay sufficient attention to how cultural norms are constituted or why they prevail. To overcome this delimitation, Richardson advocates for the use of “patterned fluidity” to develop frameworks that “allow more complex analyses of the dynamic, historically and socially specific relationship between sexuality and gender” (Richardson, 2007, p. 457).

Although these examples originate from different perspectives on intersectionality, they all recognize and address the structure/process divide. They do so by providing a structural framework for processual analyses (Tatli and Özbilgin, 2012b), by strategically engaging with essentialism (Prasad, 2012), or by bringing “patterns” back into the intersectional analysis (Richardson, 2007). Therefore, although many intersectional studies rely on the fluidity of the social, some also struggle to navigate around aspects of structure and essentialism (Richardson, 2007; Boogaard and Roggeband, 2010; Prasad, 2012; Tatli and Özbilgin, 2012b).

### **Tension 3: The incommensurability of analytical levels**

In intersectional research, analyses are often conducted from a macro, meso, or micro perspective. However, in addition to adopting these levels during the analysis, some scholars concentrate on the analytical implications of the different approaches and discuss how they can be combined (e.g. Kerner, 2012; Browne and Misra, 2003; Choo and Ferree, 2010; Christensen, 2009; Syed and Özbilgin, 2009; Tatli and Özbilgin, 2012a; Winker and Degele, 2011).

For example, Christensen’s (2009) conceptual article addresses the notion of “belonging” from the macro, meso, and micro perspectives. She emphasizes “the importance of the meso level of collective organizations and institutions in linking the macro structures to the level of individual agency and identities” (Christensen, 2009, p. 37), and points to the need for more profound empirical analyses within and across the three analytical levels. Furthermore, by dividing intersectionality research into the social-institutional (macro), workplace (meso), and individual (micro) levels, Tatli and Özbilgin (2012a) seek to dispute the acontextual and cumulative formulations of traditional categories of disadvantage, such as gender, class, race, and ethnicity. They argue that the multiplicity of identities and forms of disadvantage at all three levels enable contextual depth but also point to the complexity of intersectional analyses (Tatli and Özbilgin, 2012a). Knapp (2005) argues that intersectionality is a theoretical programmatic “aiming to relate the integrated study of large-scale societal structures of dominance, the

historical and contextual systematics of unevenly distributed power, meso-level institutional arrangements and forms of governance, interactions between individuals and groups as well as individual experiences” (p. 255). Similar to Christensen (2009), Browne and Misra (2003) argue for the development of a framework that “link[s] micro processes with meso and macro processes” (p. 507) in order to focus on intersections for all groups. These scholars argue that such an approach can initiate the redesigning of qualitative research to collect and analyze data across a wider range of groups (Browne and Misra, 2003). While Browne and Misra seek to develop active links among the three levels of analysis, Christensen (2009), Tatli and Özbilgin (2012), and Knapp (2005) serve as examples of studies that conceptualize intersectional analyses as the overarching framework that allows for the investigation of otherwise separate levels of differences and inequalities.

Choo and Ferree (2010) not only point to the tension among the macro, meso, and micro levels but also relate it to the tension between structure and process. They characterize intersectionality theories as centered either on process or systemics, and they suggest that intersectionality “runs the risk of focusing on abstracted structures in their intersectional configuration, thus turning the persons who are experiencing the impact of macro- and meso-interactions into incidental figures, underplaying their agency in these complex constellations of forces (Prins 2006; Staunaes 2003)” (Choo and Ferree, 2010, p. 134). These scholars argue that a more constructionist conceptualization of intersectionality should appeal “to those who doubt the stability of identity categories at the micro level” (Choo and Ferree, 2010, p. 134). However, rather than departing from the macro/meso/micro rhetoric, they stress that “process models can be sensitive to the issue of identities or social locations, by considering these as being constructed through (Adams and Padamsee 2001), or co-constructed with, macro and meso categories and relations (Prins 2006)” (Choo and Ferree, 2010, p. 134).

The incommensurability among different levels of analysis is evident in the fact that scholars tend to divide theorization and analysis into separate levels. Although some researchers advocate for the integration of these levels, few take a critical stance on the nature of those levels. Therefore, although some studies advocate for an integrative or linked methodology, and suggest the incorporation of all three levels of analysis, the effects of conceptualizing the analysis in different and incommensurable levels are often not addressed.

#### **Tension 4: The lack of a coherent methodology**

The fourth and final tension concerns the lack of a coherent methodology (see Nash, 2008). Several recent studies addressing intersectionality advocate for the development of alternative methods for conducting intersectional analysis (Clycq, 2012; Cole, 2009; Nash, 2008; Zanoni *et al.*, 2010), thereby enabling the potential deployment of intersectionality into a wider range of social phenomena (Yuval-Davis, 2011; Walby *et al.*, 2012; Dhamoon, 2011). However, Christensen and Jensen (2012) note that “while overall principles and abstract methodology have already been extensively discussed, there has been less debate about concrete intersectional methodology and analysis” (p. 110). Nevertheless, in recent years, there has been an upsurge in different approaches to studying intersectionality in practice. Although there is no coherent methodology among intersectional scholars, several tendencies are worth noting.

Some intersectional researchers focus on quantitative approaches, such as surveys, reproducible experiments, and the mapping of long-term trends in representation based on census reports (see, e.g. Zimdars, 2010; Steinbugler *et al.*, 2006; Stainback and Tomaskovic-Devey, 2009). However, the abundance of intersectional research lies in qualitative studies of “everyday life”. These studies often focus on narratives (see, e.g. Ozturk, 2011; Soni-Sinha and Yates, 2013; Holvino, 2010) and discourse (see, e.g. Haas, 2012; Dottolo and Stewart, 2008; Rule and Modipa, 2012). Christensen and Jensen (2012) go so far as to argue that the complexity of identity formation is revealed in the narratives and discourses of everyday life, as they provide a “melting-pot where intersecting categories are inextricably linked” (p. 117). Prins (2006) devotes an entire paper to the opportunities inherent in narrative analyses and argues that “the constructionist approach to intersectionality, with its account of identity as a narrative construction rather than a practice of naming, offers better tools for answering questions concerning intersectional identity formation than a more systemic intersectional approach” (p. 277).

There are also alternatives to narrative- and discourse-based qualitative intersectional research, some of which seek to explore methods beyond those utilized in conventional studies. For example, Valentine *et al.* (2010) argue that “events” may offer an “effective way of empirically researching the complexity of the ways that intersections of categories ... are experienced in everyday life.” (p. 925). These scholars draw on Abrams (1982) in noting that events provide an “indispensable prism” (p. 192) through which transformations between past and present can be understood, and which allows for causal links between actions and consequences to be inferred. Kaijser and Kronsell (2013) adopt a cross-disciplinary perspective

covering “a wide range of levels and topics, ranging from discourses in international climate agreements, local effects of adaptation measures, to the representations of climate change in contemporary poetry” (p. 429). In a rare case, Kennedy (2005) includes the personal computer as a salient non-human actor in identity formation. She calls for feminist science and technology studies (STS) to engage with debates on intersectionality in order to improve our understanding of women’s technological relationships (see also Diedrich *et al.*, 2011, for a discussion of intersectionality and STS-inspired classificatory thinking). Kennedy’s (2005) paper exemplifies a type of research that could develop substantially in the coming years. Similarly, Åsberg and Lykke (2010) draw on Mayberry *et al.* (2001) in their editorial piece, which suggests that feminist science studies are maturing into a field in which the intersections between gender, class, race, science, and technology are explored.

Even though the studies mentioned above differ in various ways, they share a common theme – *closeness to the subject*. Given that “closeness to the subject” and “everyday experiences” are central to most intersectional research, some scholars have recently placed greater emphasis on empirically grounded research. Tatli and Özbilgin’s (2012b) conceptual paper advocates for empirically grounded studies aimed at getting close to research subjects. They note:

The use of pre-determined categories, irrespective of historical, institutional and socio-economic context, leads to static accounts of diversity at work, which ignore the dynamic nature of power and inequality relations. Consequently, etic approaches essentialize difference in framing of workforce diversity and produce flawed empirical, theoretical and policy insights. (Tatli and Özbilgin, 2012b, p. 181)

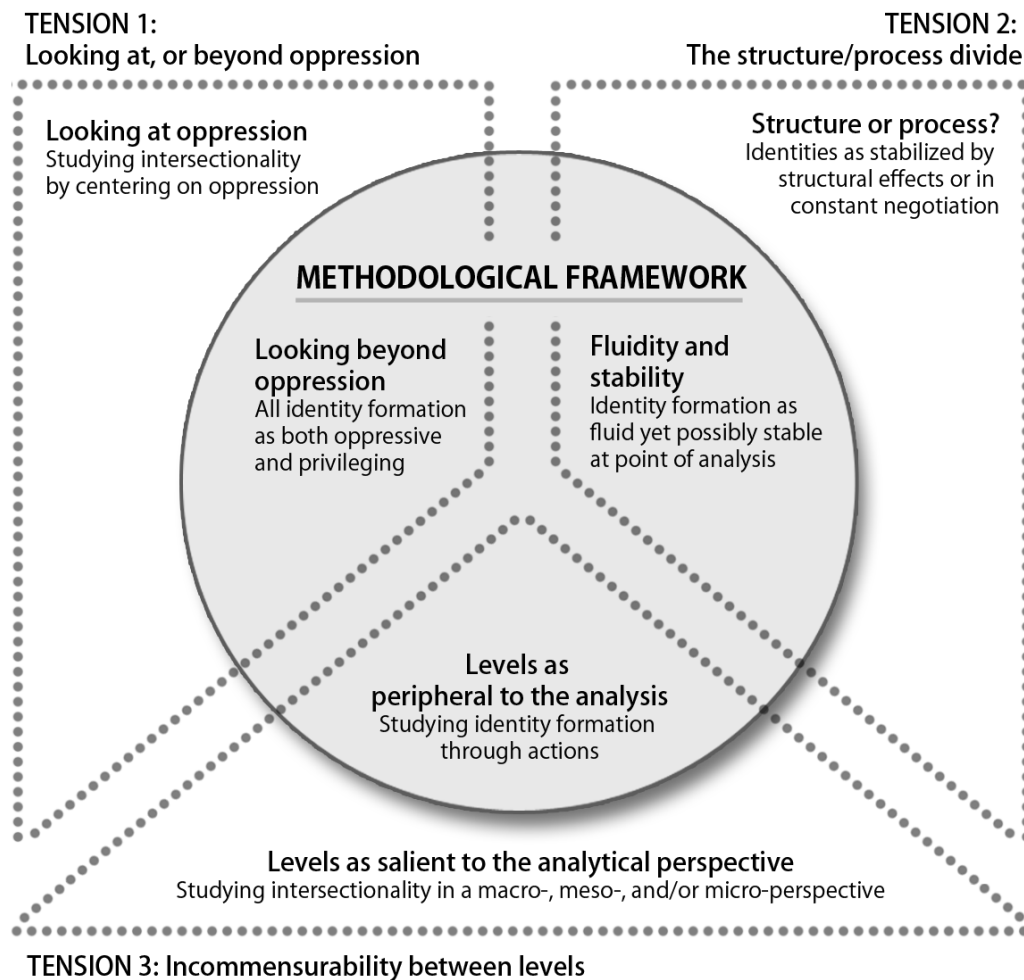
These studies are only some of the many contemporary cases that demonstrate how intersectionality is “put into practice in a multitude of ways, from the top down to the bottom up, and in highly contested, complex, and unpredictable fashions” (Cho *et al.*, 2013, p. 807). To further substantiate this multifaceted position, Cho *et al.* (2013) call for collaborative efforts across and within disciplines, suggesting that it is vital to bring “the centrifugal tendencies of scholars situated firmly within their disciplines into conversation with scholars working more at the margins of their disciplines” (p. 807).



## *The methodological framework*

In the following, I use the first three tensions to reflect on ways of bringing intersectionality forward from a methodological standpoint. In so doing, I also engage in the debate regarding the *lack of a coherent methodology* (tension 4). Figure 2 illustrates how first three tensions act as guidelines in the positioning of the methodological framework within the literature.

**Figure 2:** The suggested methodological framework and its positioning



***Looking beyond oppression:*** First, I propose pursuing the tendency to acknowledge how identity formation can be experienced as both oppression and privilege at any given time and in any given context. The primacy given to oppression has led to what Martinez (1993) calls “oppression Olympics” in which groups compete for the title of “most oppressed”. Dhamoon (2011) expands this point by noting how “the priority assigned to the race-class-gender trinity

has often meant that some forms of oppression are explained as more damaging than others (Monture, 2007, p. 199)” (p. 234). Ironically, some studies that seek to dismantle dominant positions have invoked their own strongholds within their respective research fields. In particular, the “gender-class-race trinity” has been “invoked so frequently that it has been called a mantra (Fine and Burns, 2003)” (Cole, 2009, p. 171). To keep intersectionality from evolving into a field in which theoretical primacy is given to a small group of selected identity categories, we must foster research that investigates a wide range of differences. Along these lines, Dhamoon (2011) calls for new conceptualizations of identity formation while recognizing the historical context that has led to this limited focus:

The privilege assigned to this trinity is not intrinsic to the study of categories but indicative of the choices researchers have made (and in some cases had to make) in specific historical contexts... is important to consider what analysts have invested in studying the trinity of race–class–gender and not other interactive categories. This critical reflection has the potential to open up unexpected avenues of exploration. (Dhamoon, 2011, p. 234)

The question is whether the debate around oppression should be the main discussion. Perhaps we should view oppression as just one entrance point – and not necessarily the most relevant one for understanding differences among people. To move beyond the oppression Olympics and the primacy given to just a few categories, we can develop methods that move beyond oppression as a central focus (tension 1). This not only allows for methodological advancement into unexpected avenues of exploration but also has the potential to contribute to the “critique of identity politics, for its over-stabilization of discrete groups and categories” (Walby *et al.*, 2012, p. 226)

***Fluidity and stability as co-existing:*** Second, I propose the adoption of a processual perspective that enables the conceptualization of differences in new ways. Such a processual framework must allow for the recognition of stable concepts. One reason for intersectionality’s popularity lies in its processual focus (Styhre and Eriksson-Zetterquist, 2008). Therefore, a processual perspective is neither new nor controversial. However, the debate over the actual characteristics of “a processual perspective” must be nuanced. A dynamic/processual perspective risks disregarding what we might refer to as a “stabilized social order”. Walby *et al.* (2012) argue that “the way forward is to recognize that concepts need to have their meaning temporarily stabilized at the point of analysis, even while recognizing that their social

construction is the outcome of changes and interactions over time” (p. 236). This calls for conceptualizations that recognize both change and stability.

The concept of the action net (Czarniawska, 2004), which originated from a combination of new institutional theory and the sociology of translation (Lindberg and Czarniawska, 2006), provides a possible starting point in this regard. Action nets center on the structure/process divide, as they provide a “compromise devised to embrace both the anti-essentialist aspects of all organizing (organizing never stops) and its apparently solid effects (for a moment things seem unchangeable and organized for good).” (Czarniawska, 2004, p. 780) In such a view, dominant identity categories become “connections established and then stabilized to form a unit that can be designated as an ‘action net’” (Lindberg and Czarniawska, 2006, p. 292). Established identity categories are then stable as a consequence of ongoing actions that support them. The fluidity is recognized in actions and the nets those actions unfold, while the temporal stability of social order is recognized via the summation of these actions.

***Macro, meso, and micro levels as peripheral to the analysis:*** Third, I propose that we adopt a critical stance towards the macro, meso, and micro levels as dominant analytical perspectives. The conceptualization of analyses as divided into separate levels fosters a view of these levels as incommensurable. Therefore, I suggest a focus on collective actions and how their interconnections contribute to the process of identity formation (Czarniawska and Joerges, 1996). By following actions and the nets that they unfold, we can build a case for methodology that regards the incommensurability among the macro, meso, and micro levels as a peripheral issue. Furthermore, such a view supports findings that arise from all three levels: social-institutional, organizational, and individual. Moreover, this view avoids a priori prioritization of any one level, as priority is given to actions manifested in the particular empirical context. Indeed, researchers are likely to encounter a multitude of actions, some of which support the stabilization of dominant identity nets and some that counteract that stabilization. This points to the permeability, overlaps, and possible degeneration of dominant identities. Furthermore, this view enables new conceptualizations of intersections as manifold, messy, and disordered, and forces us to rethink whether we have given priority to the most relevant identity categories, or simply embraced and reproduced the historical (and structural) baggage of intersectional theorization (Dhamoon, 2011).

***Research questions and design:*** This framework offers an approach that does not necessarily view oppression and inequalities as central themes. Notably, however, the framework does not reject oppression and inequality as valid notions. Rather, it has few

analytical ambitions upfront – it “tries to minimize the a priori assumptions before the study can begin” (Czarniawska, 2008a, p. 18). This allows for new explorations. For example this perspective enables the study of things that come into being and seem to stabilize, as well as those that are never more than an event in a brief moment in time. The strength of this perspective is that it allows us to learn from the “failures” – those actions that have less effect than actions forming dominant social categories. This, in turn, supports exploration in new territories, such as failed constructions of alternative identities, absent identities, and periodic or permanent breakdowns of dominant identities.

The following analytical questions can help guide researchers who wish to adopt this framework (see also Kaijser and Kronsell, 2013; Winker and Degele, 2011; Matsuda, 1991).

- Which social categories, if any, are represented in the empirical material?
- Which social categories are absent? Are any categories that seem important to the empirical material missing? If so, why?
- Are there any observable explicit or implicit assumptions about social categories or about relations among social categories?
- How do represented and/or absent categories support or oppose each other?
- How does the representation of the categories and their intersections shift over time or in different contexts?

Research design techniques relevant for such a framework include, but are not confined to, open-ended interviews and participant observations (Czarniawska, 2004). Moreover, as the framework is loose with a low degree of analytical ambition, scholars must be reflexive and make decisions on what to extract as significant from the context under investigation. This reflexivity is crucial and has the potential to initiate the much-needed discussion of why some categories, such as class, race, and gender, have received more attention than other conceptualizations of differences. Contrary to the tendency of a priori prioritizing some social identity categories, we should use an open-ended, grounded approach to rigorously justify the types of differences that are deemed relevant.

## ***Implications for diversity research***

One consequence of the framework proposed in this article is that social categories can only remain stable through the actions that maintain their temporal stability. As such, the framework addresses categorization, a familiar concept within intersectionality and critical diversity studies, from a different epistemological standpoint than theoretically dominant views, such as social psychology and identity theorization. More specifically, the proposed framework suggest that the analytical starting point is the emergence, change, maintenance, absence, and dissolving of social categories through the empirical study of actions.

Therefore, the framework presented here also provides for the advancement of critical diversity studies. In part, the ideas presented in this paper sit well within this area of study. However, this paper also takes a radical step away from this field. Critical diversity research has advanced the understanding of differences, but it has also often adopted a critical stance in relation to dominant categories. For example, Mir *et al.* (2006; Zanoni *et al.*, 2010) call for perspectives that examine individuals' embeddedness in local hierarchies. Although the proposed framework enables the study of such embeddedness, it does not adopt a focus on "racialized, class-based and gendered hierarchies" (Zanoni *et al.*, 2010, p. 16). Instead, it investigates how hierarchies are constructed through actions that do not pre-assign primacy to certain categories. Moreover, this framework addresses categorization from an epistemological and methodological standpoint that lies closer to the heart of action nets and other network-based theories, such as actor-network theory (see, e.g. Law, 2009), than traditional (critical) diversity scholarship.

Tatli and Özbilgin (2012a) highlight that "most workforce diversity studies ... focus on a single category of difference which is considered salient by previous studies, rather than identifying what is salient in that specific context" (p. 182). Similarly, Konrad *et al.* (2006) and Roberson (2013) note that diversity scholars cannot afford to ignore the interplay among identities. This appreciation of multiple identities and their interaction is at the heart of intersectionality. Therefore, intersectional research has an opportunity to provide direction for diversity studies on a broader scale.

According to Konrad *et al.* (2006), taking such interplays seriously also requires an expansion of our methodological horizons "to increasingly engage in research that is process-oriented and better able to capture the multiplicity of identities ... [and for] critical approaches to be melded into the pragmatics of the daily management of diversity" (p. 537). The framework

proposed here adopts such a process-oriented methodology. Moreover, the framework takes its departure from critical scholarship, pointing to the problem of giving primacy to oppression. In comparing critical diversity studies with mainstream diversity management, Ahonen *et al.* (2014) note that “the diversity that critical scholarship produces in terms of governmentality is not very far from the diversity that mainstream diversity research in management produces; [in both cases] diversity is still something that can and even should be managed to achieve desirable ends” (p. 16) No methodological framework can completely disregard a priori assumptions. However, we must develop methods that seek to minimize and/or critically assess those a priori assumptions (Ahonen *et al.*, 2014).

In conclusion, this article echoes the tendencies and tensions that characterize intersectional research today. The proposed framework is positioned within these tensions, but the framework itself holds no promises. It only suggests a way forward. Time will tell whether intersectionality will inform diversity research and organizational research at large. The framework is one small step towards bringing intersectionality into new areas. It offers opportunities for collaboration between intersectionality and the more general study of differences. Intersectionality is changing in its ongoing production (Omanovic, 2009). In the end, what will make intersectionality a prosperous field will be the advancement of its theoretical and practical content through collaborative efforts across and within disciplines (Cho *et al.*, 2013).

*(Here ends Article 1. References are listed at the end of the dissertation in Chapter 8)*

## Shifting my theoretical perspective to explain empirical developments

While intersectionality provided me with a concrete framework for analyzing the early developments of the DGW case, I was continuously exploring alternative approaches as the case evolved. About five months into my involvement, the DGW project team started to become less focused on the *content* of the employee categories they had developed, and instead started to pay attention to different ways of representing these newly developed employee categories. Though intersectionality offered a valuable perspective to investigate the way social categories evolve and become dominant, I was seeking other theories to describe why practitioners shifted their attention. It seemed that the initial objective of constructing new employee categories had been replaced by a desire to construct the diverse workforce so that it could appeal to multiple communities that did not share the same understanding of PharmaTech's workforce. I found this change difficult to explain with conventional intersectional theory. For example, unlike some intersectional research that mainly seeks to promote an anti-essentialist conceptualization of identity, I witnessed the way practitioners went back and forth between categorical and anti-categorical conceptions of the workforce (unfolded in detail in Chapter 5 and Chapter 7). Moreover, most conventional intersectional theory (to my knowledge) does not pay attention to the way different representations of identity categories enable collaboration between conflicting actors – something I found central to the development of the DGW project.

During these substantial changes in the DGW case, I was at the same time becoming increasingly familiar with the field of STS (Jensen et al., 2008; Biagioli, 1999). Quite a few of my fellow PhD students were engaged in Actor-Network Theory (ANT) research, a subfield within STS. Given that I knew little of the field, I decided to read a bit about it. I came across the book *A Theory of Organizing* by Barbara Czarniawska (2008a). In it she discusses 'action nets' – a concept closely linked to ANT research (Czarniawska, 2004). She describes action nets as a research approach with:

[N]o analytical ambitions; its introduction is an attempt to minimize that which is taken for granted prior to the analysis. A standard analysis begins with 'actors' or 'organizations'; an action net approach permits us to notice that these are the products rather than the sources of the organizing — taking place within, enabled by and constitutive of an action net. Identities are produced by and in an action net, not vice versa. (Czarniawska, 2004, p. 780)

While I was reading the book, Gothenburg Research Institute at Gothenburg University, where Czarniawska worked, held a conference on action nets (the OAN conference in November 2012). Conveniently, the list of participants included Andreas Diedrich and Ulla Eriksson-Zetterquist, two intersectional scholars whom I had noticed during my earlier review on the intersectionality literature. I saw it as a good opportunity to learn more on action nets while meeting some of the intersectional scholars whom I had gotten to know through my readings.

John Law, one of the classic contributors to ANT, notes that “the actor network approach is not a theory” (Law, 2009, p. 141). Here he notes that ‘theories’ usually try to explain why something happens, while ANT is descriptive and tells stories about how relations assemble – pointing to the way ANT can disappoint those seeking strong accounts. I will not go into the debate of whether ANT and action nets are theories or not, but rather just note that these network perspectives helped me view the phenomenon ‘a diverse workforce’ as different to what I was used to. Also, these two approaches provided me with similar insights to those that drew me towards CDS and intersectionality, as well as a liberation from some of the aspects that I do not ascribe to in CDS and intersectionality. For example, ANT and action nets are also constructionist approaches that seek to avoid essentialist notions, but, unlike conventional CDS and intersectionality, do not a priori apply critical normative assumptions (ANT is known for its forceful critique of critical sociology (see for example Saldanha, 2003 and Latour, 2004)).

My interest in action nets and ANT compelled me to look into some of the premises of these perspectives, in particular Science and Technology Studies (STS). As STS is a vastly fragmented field, it is hard to black-box it according to a stereotypical set of theoretical premises. Instead, STS is presented as research praxis (Jensen et al., 2008). Besides being known for its contributions to philosophy of science, the field generally emphasizes the interrelation between knowledge production and technologies. Notable STS contributions depart in symbolic interactionism and, in particular, studies that address questions about ‘what knowledge is’, ‘how action is to be understood’, and ‘what makes up social order’ (Jensen et al., 2008). Similar to intersectionality and CDS, many studies within STS are known for their feminist-inspired aspirations to leave dichotomous and simplified macro-categories based on oppositions. To meet this aspiration, STS calls for praxis-based studies of interactions between humans (Jensen et al., 2008).



As I started reading into STS (see for example Jensen et al., 2008; Baigioli, 1999; Law, 2009; Callon, 1986), I came across boundary object theory. By applying a boundary object perspective to a diverse workforce, I experienced a sense of ‘breakdown’ in that it disrupted the way I had previously understood the phenomenon. In this new perspective, the phenomenon, a diverse workforce, not only acted as a concept to encapsulate employee differences but also acted as a mediator between actors in an organizational conflict. Shortly thereafter, I participated in a PhD course introducing the theories most often used by senior colleagues in our department. Professor Signe Vikkelsø facilitated the course and had been a PhD student of one of the founders of boundary theory back in the 1980’s, namely, Susan Leigh Star (Star and Griesemer, 1989, Star, 2010). Signe Vikkelsø seemed like a suitable person to air my ideas about the use of the concept, and she mentioned that a boundary perspective could act as inspiration for further theory development. Chapter 5 and the paper titled “The ‘diverse workforce’ as a boundary concept: Towards new theoretical frontiers in workplace diversity research” is the result of my ongoing debate with Signe Vikkelsø and Gavin Jack on how boundary object theory can help disrupt conventional workplace diversity research. The paper is therefore a collaborative effort. Gavin Jack has particularly contributed to situating the paper in workplace diversity research (the first couple of sections of the paper), while Signe Vikkelsø has contributed by situating and assessing the paper’s use of boundary object theory (see also the co-author declaration in Chapter 9, Appendix 2).

The different theories and research fields in play in the section above (STS, ANT, and action nets) illustrate the irregular path I took to my decision to make boundary object theory a central contribution in this dissertation. It is a curvy road and messy story, in which ANT and action nets served as stepping-stones to boundary object theory. Theoretical aspects of boundary object theory, and its derivative, *boundary concepts* are unfolded in depth in Chapter 5, and so to avoid redundancy, the following section will only briefly introduce boundary object theory, and pay more attention to how the two perspectives – intersectionality and boundary object theory – relate.

## **Perspective 2: Boundary objects**

The concept of the boundary object forms part of a growing body of thought in organization theory (Zeiss and Groenewegen, 2009). Originating in STS, Star and Griesemer (1989), in their now classic work, introduced the concept of boundary objects to specifically

address the so-called “problem of common representation”. A boundary object is a conceptual device to explain how common representations exist despite diverse, sometimes conflicting, values and assumptions (Star and Griesemer, 1989) in social settings. Researchers often treat cooperation as relying upon shared cognitive schemas or shared values, but contrary to this view, a boundary object approach suggests that cooperation sometimes occurs despite a lack of consensus (Star, 2010).

Boundary objects are objects which are both plastic enough to adapt to local needs and the constraints of the several parties employing them, yet robust enough to maintain a common identity across sites. (Star and Griesemer, 1989, p. 393)

In a boundary object perspective, common representation allows for collaboration between groups that do not share the same ‘local understanding’ of a concept. Boundary objects, then, help us understand how there can be interaction without consensus between the actors involved.

### ***Bridging intersectionality and boundary object theory***

Intersectionality and boundary object theory share some notable similarities. For example, both concepts are constructionist approaches that emerged from an American, feminist movement in the late 1980’s (Star and Griesemer, 1989; Crenshaw, 1989). The coiners of each concept are also both related to other prominent American feminists such as Donna Haraway (Grzanka, 2014, p. 41; Gane, 2006, p. 137). Furthermore, prominent research within the two streams shares an interest in the construction of social classification. For example, in their classic work, *Sorting Things Out*, Geoffrey Bowker and Susan Leigh Star apply boundary object theory to the classification of patients and races (Bowker and Star, 1999), and in her canonical work, Leslie McCall puts forward the different ways intersectional scholars conceptualize categorization (McCall, 2005). Classification and categorization is then a central pillar in both fields.

That said, there are some notable differences between the concepts. Boundary object theory resides in STS – a research field that includes, but is not confined to, the study of social classification. For example, Bowker and Star (1999) also study diseases, work practices, and IT-systems. In contrast to intersectionality studies, boundary object studies extend their research to non-human actors. Early contributions within boundary object theory tended to focus on material objects (such as buildings, maps, drawings) rather than immaterial concepts (such as

social identity categories). In recent times, this tendency has been mirrored in an increasing interest in applying the boundary object theory to abstract concepts as well. For example, parts of the literature have discussed boundary objects in the form of physical objects such as standardized forms (Star and Griesemer, 1989), sketches (Henderson, 1991), design drawings (Bødker, 1998), IT objects (Briers and Chua, 2001), workflow matrices (Carlile, 2002), and prototypes (Bechky, 2003), as well as abstract objects such as conceptual artifacts (Fujimura, 1992), narratives (Bartel and Garud, 2003; Boland and Tenkasi, 1995), shared constructs (Kim and King, 2000), metaphors (Koskinen, 2005) and processes and methods (Swan, Bresnen, Newell, and Robertson, 2007). Using boundary object theory, we can illustrate how the concept ‘a diverse workforce’ acts as a flexible term that creates a ‘zone of collaboration’, despite a lack of consensus among the actors involved. Applying this perspective helps shift the focus from the concept of a diverse workforce as a phenomenon that encapsulates employees to a phenomenon that enables collaboration between actors (see Chapter 5 for more details on this argument).

### ***The ability of ‘classifications’ to nurture collaboration***

In one of the few studies combining intersectionality and boundary object theory, Diedrich et al. (2011) study how people are classified as part of a labor market project. The scholars note that classifications of people “can act as ‘boundary objects’, that is, objects that different groups can jointly agree on as setting the limitations of their practices (Star and Griesemer 1989)”. The scholars adopt an anti-essentialist perspective in noting that there are no given, natural, or universal classification systems, but rather that classifications are artificial constructs made up in the co-construction between humans and their surroundings. Diedrich et al. (2011) also note that “people in organizations know very little of how their organizational classifications in use are constructed” (p. 274). It is particularly in this respect, namely, the understanding of how classification is constructed, that the boundary object perspective contributes significantly. According to Diedrich et al. (2011), there is a lack of knowledge around how organizations construct classification systems (West and Fenstermaker, 1995). I concur and further believe that it is precisely the study of this aspect of classification – i.e. how it is formed – by which boundary object theory complements intersectionality so well. The move from viewing social categories as producing identities – an intersectional perspective – to viewing social categories as enabling collaboration despite disagreement among the actors involved – a boundary object perspective – points to how the organizing of employees is an act of ‘constructing the workforce’ to fit other agendas. However, it is also here that the limitations of the boundary

object perspective lies. By locking my gaze onto a boundary object perspective, I place central focus on *collaboration* among communities, and in particular the *enabling of collaboration*. In this perspective, dysfunctional intergroup relations and un-cooperative work fades into the background. Also, in this view there is the risk of ascribing resistance to collaboration as a result of the lack of boundary objects, which would otherwise act as facilitators between communities. Put in other words, there is a risk that I ascribe the empirical material circumstances that are not actual, namely, that I find collaboration where there is in fact little, or none. Moreover, if I find little or no collaboration, there is a risk that I may construct boundary objects as the solution to an inability to cooperate due to a lack of consensus among communities. The perspective then adopts normative assumptions of collaboration as a premise for intergroup work.

## **Moving forward by looking back: Exploring the early premises for the DGW project**

Chapter 4 illustrates how the workforce is constructed as clearly demarcated categories, and Chapter 5 illustrates how these demarcations are deconstructed and dropped, with the workforce re-represented as narratives. Having portrayed these two central series of events, I started interviewing a broader set of people peripherally engaged in the DGW project. As I became more and more accustomed to the empirical setting, I started wondering why many of my informants thought of the DGW project as a ‘political project’. If we think of ‘political’ as activities associated with the governance of a project or as activities aimed at improving certain people’s statuses, it is then hard to imagine a project that is apolitical. However, many of my informants often used the wording ‘political project’ when referring to the DGW project. I therefore became increasingly interested in how this project, in the eyes of many, was ‘more political’ than most other projects at PharmaTech. How did people use the DGW project to improve their own status? I felt that I, by not investigating these indications, would leave out an important dimension of the DGW project. Chapter 6 therefore presents a story of how the DGW eventually turned out the way it did, in part due to some early decisions that led to a cascade of unforeseen events, culminating in the DGW project becoming a political struggle between different organizational actors.

Unlike the first perspective on intersectional theory and the second perspective on boundary object theory already described in this chapter, the third perspective is not so much a theory as it is a particular branch of diversity management literature that gives primary attention to

workforce diversity in ‘context’. This third ‘contextual diversity’ perspective is an answer to a special issue call in the International Journal of Cross Cultural Management. At the beginning of 2014, Sara Muhr moved to my department (IOA) at CBS, and we seemed to share an interest in the field of diversity. She made me aware of the special issue call. As it happened, I was transcribing some of my empirical material and had come across what I believed to be an interesting story to present. I told her that I had an empirical case that would be a suitable response to the call and suggested that we collaborate on a paper. Therefore, the final paper in this dissertation is more a result of overlapping interests and a convenient special issue call, rather than a preplanned theoretical contribution. It points to one of the perks of doing a paper-based dissertation – if one wishes to see their papers published, it sometimes involves adapting to timely calls for papers and revising paper arguments to accommodate reviewers’ and editors’ demands. And so the paper in Chapter 6 is a collaborative effort. While I have taken part in the rewriting and assessing of the theoretical parts of this paper, Sara Muhr has been the main conceptualizer of the theoretical section. My main contribution is in the empirical description and in the concluding theoretical discussion of the paper (see also the co-author declaration in Chapter 9, Appendix 2). In the following section, I will briefly unfold the theoretical part of the third and final perspective (a more elaborative description of the perspective is included in Chapter 6).

### **Perspective 3: Workforce diversity in context**

The paper included in Chapter 6 takes point of departure in a particular stream of diversity management literature that emphasizes the *context* in which diversity management acts. Here workforce diversity is a situated phenomenon shaped by the surrounding actors (such as organizational structures and people). To some scholars, the main objective when investigating diversity is to “unmask ‘hidden’ contexts and ‘invisible’ power relations” (Ahonen et al., 2014: 270) and question established structures of domination and subordination (Meriläinen et al., 2009). It has been argued that rather than leading to greater equality, diversity management practices (by ignoring the socio-historical embeddedness of diversity) are naïve and even at times unethical (Muhr, 2008), as they allow systemic oppression to occur due to issues of hierarchy, privilege, equity, discrimination, and organizational justice are left alone (Holvino and Kamp, 2009; Oswick and Noon, 2014; Tomlinson and Schwabenland, 2010). Another issue noted by several diversity scholars in later years is that instead of securing equality or inclusion

many diversity practices seem to result in the reinforcement of stereotypes and the marginalization of minorities (Ghorashi and Sabelis, 2013). As a response, critical researchers have suggested that diversity management practices need to include the complexity of changing situations and the contexts in which these practices are performed (Calás et al., 2012; Jonsen et al., 2011; Holvino and Kamp, 2009; Tatli and Özbilgin, 2012a). As Holvino and Kamp (2009) succinctly put it:

Context is important. For example, what happens, when the discourse of diversity meets other dominant discourses in specific contexts? In what ways may DM [diversity management] act as a catalyst for change in different contexts? Very few studies address these questions. (Holvino and Kamp, 2009, p. 399)

It is important not only to “rethink ... taken-for-granted analytic categories for representing otherness” (Ailon, 2008, p. 900), but also to develop studies that transgress categories (Muhr, 2008; Rhodes and Westwood, 2007; Janssens and Zanoni, 2014) and binaries (Ahonen et al., 2014; Frenkel and Stenhav, 2006; Muhr and Rehn, 2014), which most diversity initiatives are built on. Therefore, it is of little value to use pre-established categories to measure the outcome of diversity. Rather, starting with an exploration of the relations of power, which would lead to the identification of salient categories, may yield surprising strands of differences, and also leave the researcher in “uncharted territory” (Tatli and Özbilgin, 2012b, p. 189).

In the study by Zanoni and Janssen’s (2004) of HRM managers’ talk vis-à-vis diversity, they show how stereotypes in societal discourses influence the way diversity management is practiced. Led by this article and its call for a discursive approach, it is by now common knowledge in CDS that dominant discourses in the socio-cultural context of organizations are of great importance in understanding how workforce diversity is perceived and performed in the organization. In this perspective, difference is socially constructed and under constant redefinition through the influence of competing discourses and existing structures of power (Ahonen et al., 2014; Knoppers et al., 2015; Lorbiecki and Jack, 2009; Van Laer and Janssens, 2011; Zanoni and Janssens, 2004). Related to this perspective, Omanović (2009) discusses diversity management from a dialectical socio-historical perspective in which he illustrates the dependence of diversity management on national translations. The term diversity is often taken for granted and as a result many different definitions are used interchangeably without clear definitions (Jonsen et al., 2011). However, because of its various backgrounds, in practice it

seems to translate locally. For example, in Scandinavia it is deeply intertwined with the development of both gender equality and, later, ethnic minority debates, whereas in the US it is much more connected with race and multi-culturalism (Boxenbaum, 2006).

Despite the unquestioned value of the above critical literature, the organizational level analysis – as Jonsen et al. (2011) argue in the conclusion to their review article – is underrepresented in diversity management research. Whereas many critical studies (rightfully and usefully) expose the influences of broader societal-cultural and socio-historical contexts for the practice of diversity management, very few studies adopt an intra-organizational, qualitative and dynamic approach to the study of organizational context. The theoretical point of departure in this third and final perspective is that workforce diversity is not just nationally and culturally situated, but is also evolving according to its organizational-political situatedness.

In this perspective, Sara Muhr and I interpret ‘context’ broadly. That is, we not only investigate current contextual circumstances but also seek to uncover some of the earliest premises for the DGW project, dating back to the years before it was formally launched. Tracing the roots of the project allows us to make clear the reasons for why political struggles arise later on in the project, providing a ‘path-dependent’ portrait of workforce diversity that emphasizes the importance of early decision-making. Also, in this third and final perspective, Sara Muhr and I place central focus on the way both human and non-human actors influence workforce diversity. For example, we elucidate how striving for economic resources and the need to provide ongoing reports to senior management have influenced the construction of ‘a diverse workforce’.

In the previous two perspectives I have focused on non-human actors in the form of; 1) social identity categories, and 2) lists, matrices, narratives. In the third and final perspective I include a different set of non-human actors. Social identity categories, boundary objects and different representations such as lists, matrices and narratives are non-human actors that, in time and space, act in close proximity to the phenomenon, directly shaping it as these actors change form or translate into new actors. In contrast, the third perspective introduces some new actors that go back to before the formal launch of the DGW project. Here I place a focus on how the phenomenon ‘a diverse workforce’, through the infrastructural and governmental premises introduced prior to the launch, have an effect at later stages of the DGW project. While I refer to it as ‘workforce diversity in context’, I should mention that this is very open and vague terminology – for what is context? By locking my gaze onto specific elements in the context, I simultaneously construct points of foci in that context. In doing so, I define what the context is.

Surely, the context could mean, and be, other things to other researchers studying the same case; therefore, the way I define central contextual dynamics reveals aspects of my interpretation. The context that I construct is coupled to my interpretation of the empirical material. This interpretation emphasizes governance and politics among human actors, as well as non-human actors (striving for economic resources and project assessment e.g. making ongoing project evaluation reports). (These contextual dynamics are unfolded in Chapter 6). As called for by Kalonaityte (2010), the contextual dynamics that we pay attention to point to an intra-organizational contextual perspective, leaving out more macro-structural and societal contextual factors otherwise known to affect workforce diversity (see for example Omanovic (2009), Boxenbaum (2006) and Ferner et al. (2005)).

## **Concluding remarks: Understanding workforce diversity through three perspectives**

Together the perspectives contribute with certain ‘lenses’ to the study of a diverse workforce. The first two chapters (Chapters 4 and 5) adopt a more *cooperative lens* in the sense that these chapters deal with how the DGW project team is trying to overcome disagreements and build up collaboration between the stakeholders involved. In contrast, the final analytical, chapter (Chapter 6) takes on a more *confronting lens* in the sense that it seeks to portray how personal gains, manipulation and power struggles construct the phenomenon.

### **1) COOPERATIVE:**

**Workforce diversity as encapsulating social identity categories (intersectionality).** Arising from critical race theory, the term was initially coined in attempts to critically assess the relationship between gender and race (Crenshaw, 1989). Intersectionality is therefore closely tied to critical diversity research, as it contests “the instrumental view of differences inherent to the [non-critical] diversity paradigm” (Zanoni et al., 2010, p. 10). I use intersectionality to portray the complexity and intertwinement of dominant employee categories in early stages of the DGW project.

### **2) COOPERATIVE:**

**Workforce diversity as a tool for collaboration (boundary objects).** A boundary object perspective enables us to demonstrate the way ‘a diverse workforce’ is comprised of loosely-structured and loosely-defined characteristics across communities, as well as well-structured



and locally-tailored characteristics within organizational communities. I use boundary object theory to make clear how the workplace diversity literature could benefit from a debate on the construction of workforce representations as a temporal phenomenon (undergoing shifting representations) and as a tool for collaboration between groups. Contrary to mainstream debates focusing on how ‘a diverse workforce’ consists of a diverse set of dimensions from the workforce, this perspective has the potential to show that ‘a diverse workforce’ can be used as a tool to create coherence in organizations, despite a lack of consensus among actors.

### 3) **CONFRONTING:**

**Workforce diversity as a situated and path-dependent phenomenon promoting certain political agendas (workforce diversity in a micro-historical and political context).** Viewing workforce diversity as an unstable and emergent concept enables us to rethink workforce diversity as shaped by its broader organizational context. In this view, it is not only stereotypical social identity categories that shape workforce diversity projects (Ailon-Sounday and Kunda, 2003) but also the politics and power of the organization itself that plays a crucial role. By paying attention to the way broader contextual factors interact with workforce diversity, I use this perspective to become attentive to the strategic agendas and to the early decisions taken before the formal launch of the DGW project.

While it is difficult, if not impossible, to fully comprehend the list of contingent circumstances that made me decide on my choice of theory, and on the central topic of this dissertation, I have in this chapter tried to present some elements that I can safely say have played a central role. These are:

- 1) an initial interest in social categorization which guided my attention towards the construction of employee categories;
- 2) the emergence of a common thread in my brainstorming efforts;
- 3) the rise of a conflict in the organization;
- 4) what I found most interesting about the case;
- 5) the theory that I knew early on;
- 6) the new theory I explored; and
- 7) the people I met and interacted with along the way.

In the following chapter, I will unfold a few more important elements that are a part of this list. I will specifically discuss 8) the type of empirical access that I had, and 9) the methods I used to collect the empirical material

# CHAPTER 3: STRATEGY OF ANALYSIS

## **Constructing and generating the investigated phenomenon**

To write up a strategy of analysis necessarily means to construct a simplified portrait of the curving and complex road that has led to my results. I try to ‘straighten out this curving road’ (i.e. reduce a messy and complex process to a comprehensible ‘Strategy of Analysis’ chapter) by discussing the aspects that I find central to the way I have gone about constructing the findings in this dissertation. Building on the central question pursued in the previous chapter, i.e. “*How is the given version of the world constructed?*” I focus in this chapter on how I have constructed a particular version of the events related to the DGW project. In broad terms, this strategy of analysis chapter concerns the type of material I have collected and how this material has been used in this dissertation. While the previous chapter dealt with theory and methodology – that is, the theoretical reflections of the methods applied – this chapter presents the actual, concrete *methods* applied. More specifically, the reflections presented in this chapter address the central question “What methods are used to construct the empirical material?” The constructionist claim that ‘no real world out there (whether it exists or not) can be accounted for objectively by any observer’ points to how no method is neutral. Any method generates, or constructs, the empirical material – and thus the choices of which methods to use *produced* my empirical material. Recognizing that the methods I have used are central to the construction of the empirical material has consequences for the phenomenon that I have studied. That is, *the methods not only shape the empirical material but also generate the phenomenon that I study*. Or put simply, I construct the concept of ‘a diverse workforce’ simply by making choices about which methods to use.

As I unfold my analysis in the coming three chapters (4-6), it should be noted that as my methods evolved, so did the phenomenon that I studied. For example, in my interviews and observations I moved from paying attention to employee categories – portraying a diverse workforce as a concept used to classify employees (Chapter 4) – to paying attention to shifting representations – portraying the concept as a facilitator of collaboration between human actors (Chapter 5). In later periods of my involvement, people had become acquainted with my presence, enabling a different type of interview and observation whereby I was able to discuss topics with my informants in a more informal and trustworthy way. In these later periods, I also started to pay increasing attention to how both human and non-human actors influenced the

concept, portraying a diverse workforce as a politically and contextually situated concept (Chapter 6).

### ***How my contractual agreement with PharmaTech influenced my choice of methods***

While theory, methodology and the empirical setting have contributed to the construction of the applied methods, these elements are not the only sources of influence. Before discussing my style of research, I want to emphasize the particular relevance that my contractual agreement with PharmaTech as an industrial PhD fellow has had for my choice of methods. The contractual agreement meant that I was expected to stay engaged with my empirical setting, the corporate HRM division of PharmaTech, over a period of three years. During these three years of PhD research, I was expected to spend around 50 % of my time in the company (and 50 % at the university). While there were periods where I spent a majority of my time at the university, for example, when conducting literature reviews or in the later months of finalizing this dissertation, there were other periods where I spent the majority of my time at PharmaTech.

All in all, the contractual agreement meant that at no time during these three years did I completely drop my engagement with PharmaTech. As a consequence, I was kept up to date with developments relating to the DGW project – including after the closing down of the DGW project. Long-term involvement in the empirical setting therefore came as an automatic part of the contractual setup. Moreover, being employed by PharmaTech meant that an active and engaged research role felt like the right choice (after a few months of assimilation), since I knew I would spend time with my colleagues at PharmaTech for three years and would therefore get to know these people quite well. For example, I was included as an employee in the Department of Organizational Development, with all the typical activities associated with this position (such as department meetings, lunches, office space, team building exercises, etc.). As I will unfold later in this chapter, I adopted an ethnographic and participatory research style with an aspiration to ground my findings in the work of practitioners. Moreover, my analysis relies on thick descriptions and an in-depth unfolding of one case, the DGW project. Thus, the decision to adopt this specific style of research was heavily influenced by my contractual and long-term involvement with PharmaTech.

## Doing ethnographic fieldwork

My involvement with PharmaTech had characteristics often associated with ethnographic research. Some of these ethnographic characteristics are: 1) my use of qualitative methods such as ongoing participant observations and interviews; 2) my aspiration to ground my findings in the work done by practitioners rather than explore pre-determined hypotheses; 3) my long-term commitment and aspiration to learn ‘how natives think’; and 4) a ‘thick description’ and personal account of the events that have taken place. I tend to think of ‘ethnography’ as a style of research that involves a long-term commitment to the empirical setting and which includes a variety of methods (such as interviews, observations, field notes etc.) in order to collect empirical material (Brewer, 2004). Inspired by John Brewer, I define my ethnographical involvement as:

[T]he study of organizing in naturally occurring settings by means of methods which capture activities, involving the researcher participating directly in the setting in order to construct the empirical material. (Brewer, 2004, p. 10)

Ethnographies often make use of open, unstructured, emergent, and flexible methods, which can result in unsystematic data collection and non-generalizable findings (Brewer, 2004; Buchanan and Bryman, 2009; Fine et al., 2009). Such an ‘unsystematic approach’ can make it difficult to comparatively assess data since variations in the data can be attributed to variations in the way they were collected, rather than differences in the data when using the same methods (Brewer, 2004, p. 318). This points to what some scholars refer to as the ‘double crisis’ of ethnography (Brewer, 2000; Brewer, 2004; Denzin and Lincoln, 1998). The first is the *crisis of representation* arguing that ethnography can never “produce universally valid knowledge by accurately capturing the nature of the social world ‘as it is’” (Brewer, 2004, p. 319) and the second is the *crisis of legitimization* as “terms like ‘validity’, ‘reliability’ and ‘generalizability’ lose their authority to legitimate the data” (Brewer, 2004, p. 319). These two crises originate in an epistemological discussion of how to *represent legitimate* research. Contrary to forms of science that rely on validity, rationality and objectivism, ethnographic research aims to legitimize by constructing credibility among audiences. Or put in other words, ‘good ethnographic research’ does not follow a specific set of rational and objective rules, but is instead socially constructed (and social constructionists would argue that the same goes for all

scientific research). Therefore, what is deemed legitimate depends on the audience with whom one is communicating with (Fine et al., 2009; Lincoln and Guba, 1985).

The ‘audience’ of this dissertation is not clearly defined, but rather dependent on a range of contingent circumstances, of which I only have some degree of control (and do not necessarily want to control!). However, I can safely say that the foremost groups in this audience are the academics within the same fields of research, including the assessment committee of this dissertation, the journal editors and reviewers of the papers included in this dissertation and my broader academic network in which I seek professional recognition. While the opinions and standards of these groups differ, my research *legitimacy*, in many ways, becomes a case of my research *credibility* – that is, my ability to convince people that my findings are plausible and believable.

### ***The elusive more***

Doing ethnography involves the act of translating and presenting findings in a personalized way, where the researcher’s interpretations are central to constructing the findings (Spradley, 1979). While I have touched upon my reflexive and interpretative stance in the previous chapter when discussing my abductive and breakdown sensitive approach – an approach where I make ongoing sense of, and interpret, occurrences – I will, in the following sections, unfold this a bit more and in so doing point to some concrete activities.

It is characteristic of my research that, rather than attempting to build consistency by relying on conventional and systematic data collection, I seek to adapt to new inputs as I get to know the empirical setting better. Harry Wolcott, an ethnographer known for his role in debates on ethnography and intimacy (Wolcott, 2002; Wolcott, 1999), argues that ethnographic accounts can thrive in such unknown territory. He notes that ethnographic research involves something ‘more’ than simply collecting data:

Whatever constitutes this elusive ‘more’ makes all the difference. That needs to be stated emphatically, for a crucial aspect of fieldwork lies in recognizing when to be unmethodical, when to resist the potential endless task of accumulating data and begin searching for underlying patterns, relationships and meaning. (Wolcott, 2005, p. 5)

Part of this ‘elusive more’ concerns how, as a researcher, one is deeply engaged in the empirical setting – how one becomes familiar with the daily routines and activities, as well as

how one builds emotional ties with people. As noted earlier, my contractual agreement catered well for such an in-depth engagement. Large, and in particular the later, parts of the collected empirical material have come about as a result of me having a relationship based on trust and confidence with my informants. In my research, obtaining ‘adequate distance’ to an object of study was replaced by an aspiration to get close to my informants, my colleagues and the practitioners around me at PharmaTech. The debate of ‘being close or keeping a distance’ often pits subjectivist research, which seeks to legitimize specific versions of the world, against objectivist research, which seeks to validate an objective ‘reality’ (Toma, 2000). Again, my research (at most) seeks to legitimize one of many versions of the events at PharmaTech (namely, my interpretation of the events) rather than validate what really happened. In the following, I will unfold how ‘more than simply collecting data’ – the ‘elusive more’ – was exemplified by a profound engagement with the daily work of PharmaTech’s corporate and global HRM division.

## ***Doing observations***

### **Getting close and playing on the same turf**

When I started at PharmaTech, I was struggling to assess what the appropriate level of my involvement in meetings should be. Should I participate actively, and if so, how much? Or should I stay quiet and mostly concentrate on taking notes and observing? Overtime, I explored different approaches and this process can best be summarized as a shift from being a ‘non-participating observer’ to being an ‘actively participating team member’. Part of my reason to become increasingly engaged with the DGW project team came from a desire to feel included and be seen as ‘one of the team’ rather than the silent observer. I noticed how the earlier meetings in which I did non-participant observations sometimes felt awkward and led to frustrations. Rather than getting to know these people and their thoughts better, I felt that I was distancing myself during these meetings, and I subsequently felt more and more like a stranger. Also, it seemed to me that my presence was sometimes an obstacle to focusing on the work that needed to be done. For example, in one of my earliest non-participatory observations, I had been silently observing and taking notes. At the end of the meeting, the team asked for my inputs. I presented my take on some of the topics discussed at the meeting. I started questioning some of the basic ‘rules of the game’ and ended up invoking a somewhat academic (and perhaps arrogant) style of reasoning. One team member promptly cut me off and told me that “unlike

academics we stay focused on the ball” – implying that I was losing focus on what was relevant. I was the academic, they, the practitioners. This comment made an indelible impression on me. In the period that followed, I felt torn between, on the one hand, making room for abstract and ‘academic’ reflection during meetings, which I did best by being a non-participant, and on the other, actively participating and then reflecting on the meetings afterward.

In the early phases of my research, I felt like an outsider who did not understand the organizational culture and structure. For example, I did not know the people very well, I did not know my way around the office space, and I did not understand much of the abbreviations and jargon used. I decided to make an effort to get familiar with my empirical setting by spending the majority of my time at PharmaTech during the first 5 months of the PhD project. I started to feel a sense of belonging and got along well with the people in my department. I quickly established a jovial rapport with my manager’s personal assistant, as we were around the same age and seemed to have a similar sense of humor. Making jokes and chatting with her in the open-plan office space prompted others to join in, which seemed to encourage them to embrace my presence at the workplace. Looking back, I believe that my socializing activities in the open-plan workspace were central to my becoming accepted as part of the department while simultaneously leading to my own more active role during observations. This assimilation involved becoming familiar with people and gaining their trust. While this familiarity enabled me to have increasingly ‘trust-based’ conversations with my informants later on, I did not deliberately seek this type of relationship in order to gain trust-based insights. My decision to build up a friendly working atmosphere with this group of people was instead a rather pragmatic choice, as I was required to work with these people on and off for the next three years.

My desire to become part of, and contribute to, a constructive working environment influenced the methods I used to collect the empirical material. For example, over time my written notes went from being substantive to being less elaborate, pointing to how my more active role left little time to write down my more research-based reflections during meetings. Furthermore, as I became a more trusted member of the group, my conversations turned towards different types of issues - in particular towards discussions the interests that different people associated to the project held. About four months into the project, I had progressively changed my style of doing observations from acting as the quiet observer to ‘playing ball on the same turf’, meaning my role during meetings and other observations had shifted to an active participating team member. This change also meant that I was given job tasks relating to the

DGW project in its later phases, and I therefore see my own role as having played a significant part in shaping the project, which I, as a researcher, also investigated.

### **From more elaborate reflections to making brief time-stamp comments**

To ‘start playing on the same turf’ meant that I sought to simultaneously participate and document what was going on. Since less room was left for me to take substantive notes when I started actively participating, I began to audio record as many meetings as possible. I recorded just about every project meeting that I participated in until the DGW was closed down. Moreover, I recorded all the interviews I did during and after the closing down of the DGW project. Besides these audio recordings, I continued to write down field notes. However, these later field notes often contained brief comments rather than elaborate reflections. For example, I used time-stamps, which I wrote down while the recording was taking place, referring to sections of the meeting or interview in which certain topics were discussed, or even referring to specific dialogues or quotes during the meeting or interview. This enabled me to retrace the particular discussion at the given time in the audio file that I was recording. A timestamp could look as follows:

August 10<sup>th</sup> 2012 – 10:23 AM: The team discusses how to represent employee categories as matrices instead of lists.

When the conversation turned to things that I wanted to clarify further, or topics that I had further inquires about, I would either start asking questions related to the topic, or if I felt it obstructed the meeting too much, I would write down a note reminding myself to ask the question later on during an interview. Below is an example of a note where I remind myself to ask a question later on:

April 24<sup>th</sup> 2013 – 14:38 PM: Trevor (Team member 1) points out how Gareth (Senior Vice President) believes age needs to be included as an employee category. NOTE: Remember to ask Trevor why Gareth believes this to be important.

I would then pose a question based on this comment during an interview held with Trevor to clarify what he meant. The above example with Trevor is one of many. Asking interviewees during interviews to unfold or clarify conversations held earlier during participatory



observation-meetings eventually meant that observations and interviews became increasingly intertwined. For example, when other team members and I met up for a team meeting after an interview, we sometimes referred back to conversations held during an earlier one-on-one interview. Sometimes, interviews seemed like an extension of a previously held meeting, and the designation of me as a researcher became gradually blurrier, as I increasingly adapted ‘normal’ employee behavior and often continued this type of behavior during interviews.

I recorded all interviews and close to 90 % of all meetings, which led to a vast amount of empirical material (about 150 hours of recordings). In the beginning, I felt how the presence of the audio recorder sometimes ‘skewed’ or even obstructed the conversation. My guess is that people refrained from saying very controversial things or making statements that might put them in a precarious situation. The extent to which people held back on controversial statements at later stages is beyond my knowledge. I was, however, very clear about keeping the anonymity of my informants, and felt that people increasingly trusted me in handling these recordings. As people started to trust me, I ended up having different, and what felt like more honest, conversations, despite the presence of an audio recorder. Due to my consistency in recording, it got to the point that, if I had forgotten, I was reminded by participants to start recording. Also, in one instance, with the consent of all participants at the meeting, I used one of my recordings to extract quotes from earlier meetings for practitioners to use these in presentations later on.

### ***Doing interviews***

My early interviews are best described as semi-structured (Kvale, 1997, p. 51). The early interview structure was inspired by the work of Özbilgin and Tatli in their book *Global Diversity Management: An Evidence Based Approach* from 2008. I had already encountered these scholars in another setting, was inspired by their work, and found that the interview guidelines in their book were not only comprehensible and easy-to-use, but also had the particular aim of guiding scholars in the field of global diversity management issues (see for example Özbilgin and Tatli (2008, p. 56-58, 145-150, 318-322)). The scholars offer a framework for conducting interviews that uses open-ended questioning, whereby the authors seek to “transcend binary oppositions not only in our conception of diversity, but also in our methodological choices” (Özbilgin and Tatli, 2008, p. XIV, preface). According to the authors, this approach caters for a theoretical and empirical approach to social research that “allows for

multi-disciplinary perspectives to be integrated. This requires us to blend theory and empirical evidence, with a view to grounding rhetoric in social reality” (Özbilgin and Tatli, 2008).

In the earliest months of the project, I formulated an interview schedule consisting of 55 questions (see ‘Appendix 1: DGW project interview questions (early phases)’). This schedule was partly inspired by Tatli and Özbilgin’s “Diversity Interview Schedule” (Özbilgin and Tatli, 2008, p. 432). While the framework presented by Özbilgin and Tatli aims to investigate the impact of global diversity management at an organizational level, my investigation had a related yet somewhat different agenda. The set of questions provided in the book are applicable to different organizations in different contexts and are therefore somewhat generic. And so while the questions I formulated were inspired by the formulations used by Özbilgin and Tatli, as well as their division of questions into particular topics, the schedule that I constructed was contextualized via concrete issues related to the DGW project and used the same vocabulary as employees at PharmaTech.

Having a preliminary interview framework gave me a basis for asking questions in my early interviews. However, adopting an open and emergent research style meant that over time I started to go back and forth between semi-structured and unstructured interviews. When I started doing the interviews, I learned that some questions worked well and led to stimulating discussions while others became less relevant (such as biographical information about the interviewee as well as more common knowledge among employees at PharmaTech). As time went by, I relied less and less on predefined interview questions. It got to the point where I often did not ask predefined questions at all, and instead prioritized maintaining a natural conversation. Rather than making sure specific questions were asked, I sometimes guided the conversation into different and possibly more interesting directions by mimicking a more natural dialogue. My experience was that these conversations ventured into more honest and open accounts of topics that might have otherwise been challenging to gain insight into – such as the political struggles related to the DGW project. My loose approach to doing interviews was in part a result of my easy and continuous access to the field (as mentioned earlier, I was employed by PharmaTech and had to spend 50 % of my time at the company). I could always book another meeting and ask some of the questions that I did not get around to later on.

On a couple of occasions, I held ‘short interviews’ to discuss important occurrences, such as when one of the team members had come back from a meeting with top management. I did such an interview to get their immediate and personal reflections on the events. For these types of interviews, I had little if any pre-determined questions; rather, I was seeking an update,

sometimes making up new questions while we talked or if I learned about new developments in the project.

Even though I in many cases sought to stay open to new topics during conversations, at times I also guided the conversation towards specific topics – a guidance that contributed to the shaping of the phenomenon under investigation. For example, during later phases of the PhD project my interests in the political struggles and the preliminary premises for the DGW project intensified. This meant that I was actively seeking to guide the interviewee towards talking about this topic by asking broad and open-ended questions relating to the issue. My interest in these political struggles meant that I helped construct the ‘diverse workforce’ as a politically infused phenomenon. Moreover, in these later phases I would get caught up in the conversation, and openly stated my own opinion about the topic. It seemed that at these later stages it became increasingly problematic to position myself as having a formal distance, being unbiased or unknowing, and generally not revealing any opinion about the topic at hand. Such a formal position seemed to frame me more as an external observer rather than as “one of us”, resulting in more politically correct and perhaps less honest answers. An example of provoking an unwanted formal tone is how in the earlier interviews I asked people to tell factual information about themselves such as age, name, position in the company, etc. In later phases, and having become better acquainted with the interviewees, I became aware that such questions were giving a formal tone to the interview even before we really got started. This caused some people to refrain from opening up and engaging in informal conversation. By these later stages, I had become a well-known colleague who was deeply engaged in the work setting; therefore, adopting such a formal line of questioning was counter-productive, as the topics I sought to discuss seemed to be best discussed in an informal atmosphere based on trust.

### **Getting a new manager**

About five months into the PhD project, my department underwent an abrupt organizational restructuring. My manager at the time was transferred to a different area of the organization and my department got a new manager. This new manager was instated to oversee the running of the DGW project. This would prove to be somewhat of a game changer for me, my research and for the DGW project. While my previous manager was actively engaged in making the DGW project a success, my new manager was very critical of the project and of the way the Senior Vice President was running the project (as well as how he was running the corporate HRM division more generally). The new manager stated early on that he believed the DGW project

was serving another purpose than simply seeking to accommodate the company's increasingly diverse workforce. According to him, the DGW was a piece in a jigsaw that enabled the Senior Vice President to accommodate the interests of top-management. As the final empirical article shows, not only did this become the new manager's belief, but it was also recounted in many of the interviews I did with other employees.

Given that this new manager became my manager, I received detailed insights into the organizational top-level struggles from him. He had a charming, very critical and persuasive character, and I must acknowledge the large influence he has had on the outcome of this dissertation. Besides our everyday interactions, I held ongoing personal meetings/interviews on a two-to-three week basis with him. As a result of these meetings, I started to get a comprehensive idea of his view of the DGW project. I found many of his insights provocative yet interesting and must admit that I have held a bias towards exploring whether these insights rang true in the minds of other employees. Based on his insights, I started, during later phases of the project, to hold increasingly unstructured and individual interviews, rather than make observations in plenum. I did this to discuss some of the more political aspects of the DGW project – a topic of conversation that was often not debated in plenum. As a result the final analytical part of this dissertation, Chapter 6, focuses on the political situatedness of the DGW project – a perspective heavily inspired by the opinions held by my new manager.

### **Asking biased questions to expose assumptions**

Interview questions are never neutral and there is no such thing as “the right interview”. That said, there are ways to make people more or less partial towards certain opinions as well as ways to make them confirm what you believe. At times, I was torn between striving to carefully consider the assumptions that I injected into the conversation, and striving to keep the conversation natural and thereby receive accounts that were not ‘obstructed’ by a formal atmosphere – also referred to as the emotional dilemma (Kvale, 1997, p. 152). ‘Gaining trust’ in conversations sometimes includes aligning opinions. When conducting interviews, especially in the later phases, I was often faced with the challenge of being sincere while avoiding manipulation by imposing my own assumptions on the interviewees. A couple of months into the project, I started exploring ways to expose and interact with my own research assumptions.

Several scholars call for a critical assessment of the researchers own assumptions (Alvesson, 2013; Alvesson and Kärreman, 2011; Alvesson and Sandberg, 2011; Davis, 1971; Pullen and Rhodes, 2008). In the example given below, I experiment with how to expose my

own assumptions *by asking biased questions* – a somewhat unconventional approach to doing interviews (Kvale, 1997, p. 157). Asking strongly biased questions can act as an entryway to acquire an empirically-grounded critique of the *interviewer's*, not the *interviewee's*, assumptions. My experimentation with such biased questioning not only made me take a critical stance toward my own assumptions, but also ended up revealing interesting new insights. One's own assumptions can be both hidden and infrastructural, making it all the more difficult to be aware of them. Articulating and explicating one's own understanding of a topic can sometimes expose these hidden assumptions. It is then through the critical voices of interviewees and other participants that alternative understandings are uncovered. Below I present an example of my biased questioning, used to gain new perspectives on the DGW project (from an interview held on January 29<sup>th</sup> 2013):

**Me:** *If the project had been approached differently, how could it have become a success?*

**Interviewee:** *So you're assuming that it wasn't a success.*

**Me:** *Well...*

**Interviewee:** *By the way you're phrasing the question, your question implies to me that you believe it wasn't a success.*

**Me:** *Yeah, that's true. I agree, perhaps it's too much of an assumption.*

**Interviewee:** *But that isn't your question?*

**Me:** *Actually the question I've written down here is 'How is the project a success in your view?'*

**Interviewee:** *How is it a success in my view?*

**Me:** *Yeah.*

**Interviewee:** *Yeah, okay – I'm just giving you a little bit of researcher feedback.*

**Me:** *Sure.*

**Interviewee:** *How has it been a success and how could it have been more successful?*

To some, the dialogue above could seem like poor scholarly work. I do not seem to ask the question in the right way, as I had another similar, but 'less-biased' question written down. I let my own assumptions spill over into the conversation in assuming that the project was unsuccessful. While I in fact did have the other question written down, the way I phrased my question was, in the interview moment, an attempt to align my view with the interviewee, as she had explicitly stated earlier on, during the same interview, that she did not believe the project to be a success. It seemed that I, in her view, had violated my scholarly integrity, by assuming that the project was unsuccessful. A few months earlier in an interview held on September 9<sup>th</sup> 2012,

I encountered opposition to this exact question: *How could the project have become a success?* Instead of correcting myself after this interview, I decided to keep asking interviewees this question to observe the reactions. In this case, the interviewee constructs her own ‘more proper’ version of the question, namely: *How has it been a success and how could it have been more successful?* There are clear differences between the question I asked and the question the interviewee suggests. The written down question: “How is the project a success in your view?” seemed more accepted. Perhaps the bias towards the written down question indicated how people believed that I should keep a ‘scholarly objective distance’ by not assuming that the project was a failure.

Earlier during the interview quoted above, the interviewee described how she believed that the project was unsuccessful. However, she also pointed out and criticized my assumption, though it was similar to hers. I started to reflect more deeply about this. It seemed that her pointing out that I am making assumptions about the DGW project also could point to another concern. It could indicate that she was reluctant to let me conclude that the project was unsuccessful despite her and others believing that this was in fact the case. As my insights into PharmaTech grew, I learned that framing the project as unsuccessful implicitly or ‘off the record’ was accepted by many, though explicating projects as unsuccessful was specifically against the culture of the organization – and in particular this project. Perhaps I was still, in her view, a ‘foreigner’ – an academic and not a ‘native’ PharmaTech employee – and she was therefore wary of adopting a more informal view on the project in front of me. Asking biased questions eventually led to a deeper investigation of why such great effort was put into *not* explicating project-failure, despite employees having such opinions.

Asking these subjective and assumptive questions made me question my own assumptions and made me consider other possible reasons for the reactions I encountered during some interviews. The example above shows how I went from relying on a predefined set of questions formulated in the interview schedule (Appendix 1) to trying new ways of questioning in order to elicit alternative reactions from interviewees. In the later phases, it seemed as if my interviewing technique took a more reflexive turn as I became increasingly aware of how questions about the same topic had profoundly different reactions depending on how and to whom the questions were asked.

### ***Selecting parts of the empirical material***

In what follows, I illustrate how theories and field notes came into play when picking out relevant recordings. The vast amount of recordings (approximately 150 hours) meant that I, in analyzing the empirical material, relied on my field notes to get an overview. The criteria for deciding which recordings I would briefly revisit, and which ones I would explore in more depth (by transcribing and translating) were based on a combination of the theories in play, and whether the field notes contributed to particular perspectives on the phenomenon. To illustrate how these criteria's were co-constructed by a combination of contingent circumstances consider the article presented in Chapter 5. In this article I place a focus on multiple visual and text-based representations of a diverse workforce. Prior to the writing of this article I had participated in an Actor-Network Theory PhD-course, I had my gaze on boundary object theory, and I was becoming increasingly interested in how objects can hold multiple representations – a central focus in these theoretical perspectives. This led me to a particular interest in a workshop held by the DGW team in August 2012 in which multiple representations were tried out and debated. The field notes and photos of whiteboard drawings taken during this workshop, in which the DGW team tried different ways to list and combine employee categories, directed my attention towards how the team used different representations to tackle the complexity arising when trying to associate and intersect multiple categories. As I was going through some of the empirical material, the workshop stood out as good example of demonstrating ideas that I was reflecting on as a consequence of the theories I was engaged with at the time. I started formulating these ideas into a paper and the argument was tested and debated with different co-authors. Eventually these ideas grew into a contribution to workforce diversity research departing in boundary object theory (see Chapter 5).

### **Transcribing, translating and interpreting the empirical material**

While all recordings have been revisited during the analysis, about 25 % of the recorded interviews have been either partly or fully transcribed as well as about 30 % of the observations. Table 1 below lists the number and distribution of recordings.

**Table 1:** Number of recorded observations and interviews done from March 2012 to November 2013.

	<b>Observations</b> (90-180 minutes)	<b>Interviews</b> (45-120 minutes)	<b>‘Short interviews’</b> (10-15 minutes)
<b>Part 1 (Chapter 4)</b>	96 %	4 %	0 %
<b>Part 2 (Chapter 5)</b>	61 %	31 %	8 %
<b>Part 3 (Chapter 6)</b>	54 %	46 %	0 %
<b>Total number of recordings</b>	49	13	2
	While the majority, 32 recordings, were meetings held with the project team, another 17 of these were workshops including people beyond the team (ranging from 5 to 40 participants)	The total number of interviews comprised of about 40 % semi-structured and 60 % unstructured interviews.	The short interviews were unstructured.
<b>Positions held by informants</b>	Project team members, Senior Vice Presidents, Vice Presidents, department managers, CoE employees, internal and external consultants	Project team members, corporate managers, other department managers, CoE employees	Project team members

Transcribing and translating involves an interpretation of the material that contributes to the constructing of the phenomenon that I have studied. For example, transcriptions are constructions from verbal communication to text (Kvale, 1997, p. 163) – a transformation in which the transcriber’s own interpretations affect the material. Furthermore, translations from one language to another are reconstructions of text that once more necessitates interpretation. Some local Danish jargon used at PharmaTech as well as some more generally used Danish phrases and expressions can be difficult to translate into English. As I have done all the transcriptions and translations myself, these two undertakings are crucial moments in which ‘my voice’ (though somewhat indirectly) is particularly prominent.



In general, my interpretation of the empirical material takes many forms, such as picking out topics of relevance, transcribing dialogues related to these topics, translating dialogues, picking out quotes, and constructing an analytical narrative in which these quotes are included. Alvesson and Skoldberg note how the researcher's interpretation is an ongoing process that cannot be situated in specific phases of the research (Alvesson and Sköldberg, 2009), but instead comprises these many forms of transformation and selection vis-à-vis the material. While my interpretation of the material comprises many forms and therefore is not restricted to one single phase, the list below is an attempt to sequence some of the most central steps in an iterative process of producing an understanding of the phenomenon investigated.

- 1) **Collecting empirical material** (i.e. recording meetings and interviews and writing up field notes). Initially, in the first phase of my empirical material collection, I applied the grounded intersectional framework presented in the article in the previous chapter (Chapter 2). In this early phase, I used an open-ended approach, seeking to 'go along' with unforeseen developments, but with a particular focus on 'following the employee categories' as they evolved.
- 2) **Re-evaluating empirical material:** (i.e. revisiting recorded meetings and interviews based on a set of concerns). The criteria for revisiting recordings and field notes were based on multiple concerns. While I have already mentioned how the utilized theories played a role, other circumstances also played a role. Other reasons for assessing the empirical material were whether the empirical material could contribute to new insights in the particular literary field that I was aiming to contribute to, whether key stakeholders within PharmaTech would find these insights relevant, and whether I found these insights interesting and relevant for the overall story I wanted to tell.
- 3) **Selecting empirical material:** Selecting, transcribing and translating recordings were based on how well the material helped convey the argument I sought to furnish the audience with (including both practitioners at PharmaTech and academics in my research community).
- 4) **Revisiting the field:** Collecting, re-evaluating and selecting new empirical material based on new insights. These insights include: how the DGW project evolved, my changed status as an increasingly trustworthy colleague (allowing me to discuss topics differently with informants), new theories in play, and how people reacted to preliminary findings.

## An analytical journey

While the process of handling the empirical material had much iteration, I want to stress that the analysis was just as much a *journey*. More concretely, I have in this chapter pointed to some occurrences such as: 1) my contractual agreement with PharmaTech, 2) getting a new manager, 3) accommodating the empirical setting (playing ball on the same turf), 4) exposing my own assumptions through subjective interview questioning, and 5) selecting parts of the empirical material. These are all examples of (sometimes unforeseen) events shaping my analysis as my engagement in the field unfolded. It is therefore no coincidence that the following three chapters – the analytical part of this dissertation (Chapter 4-6) – account for different periods during the collection of my empirical material (see Figure 1). Making adjustments to the way I collected my empirical material illustrates how my choice of methods was in fact an ongoing decision-making process rather than a set of fixed decisions about predetermined techniques made prior to entering the empirical scene. This ongoing decision-making process is also evident in how my analysis evolves and changes as new inputs enter the scene. It is in this way that the three analytical chapters together represent a journey:

### Chapter 4: Analysis Part 1

- **Period:** Represents the first five months of my study. In this phase, I had just entered the empirical scene; I felt like somewhat of a newcomer and was eagerly trying to make sense of what was going on. The empirical material from this first phase consists primarily of observations (24 recordings) and one interview.
- **Representation of the empirical material:** In this phase, I take point of departure in the intersectional methodological framework developed in the article presented in Chapter 2. I place central focus on how the workforce is segmented into prototypical and dominant employee categories. To describe this complex and messy segmentation process, I construct a series of critical steps. These steps serve two purposes: First, the critical steps represent the momentary representations of the employee categories as objects that can be analysed; and second, the critical steps demonstrate how the empirical data is segmented, making the steps the analytical points of comparison among the different stages of employee-category development. These designations represent the summation of everyday actions within a specific period of time in which employee categories were represented in distinct ways.

## Chapter 5: Analysis Part 2

- **Period:** The analysis presented in Chapter 5 represents the subsequent five months, thus following the DGW project to its end. This analytical phase marks a shift in the development of the DGW, as well as a shift in my use of the empirical material. About five months into the project, a shift took place in the way DGW project evolved. The project team started to pay increased attention to multiple forms of workforce representation, the team got a new manager, and the team became increasingly concerned with the political struggles around the project. In this later phase of the DGW project, I held ongoing participatory meetings with the project team (15 recordings) along with increased interview activity (8 recordings).
- **Representation of the empirical material:** In this second phase, I, along with co-authors Gavin Jack and Signe Vikkelsø, apply a different theoretical perspective – boundary object theory – to explain the multiple forms of workforce representations. Similar to the previous analytical phase, I construct a series of steps to mark shifting representations. However, in this next analytical phase, I shift from what employee categories capture and how these categories become dominating, to how these categories are *represented* in multiple forms, both categorical and non-categorical (for example, as lists, matrices and narratives).

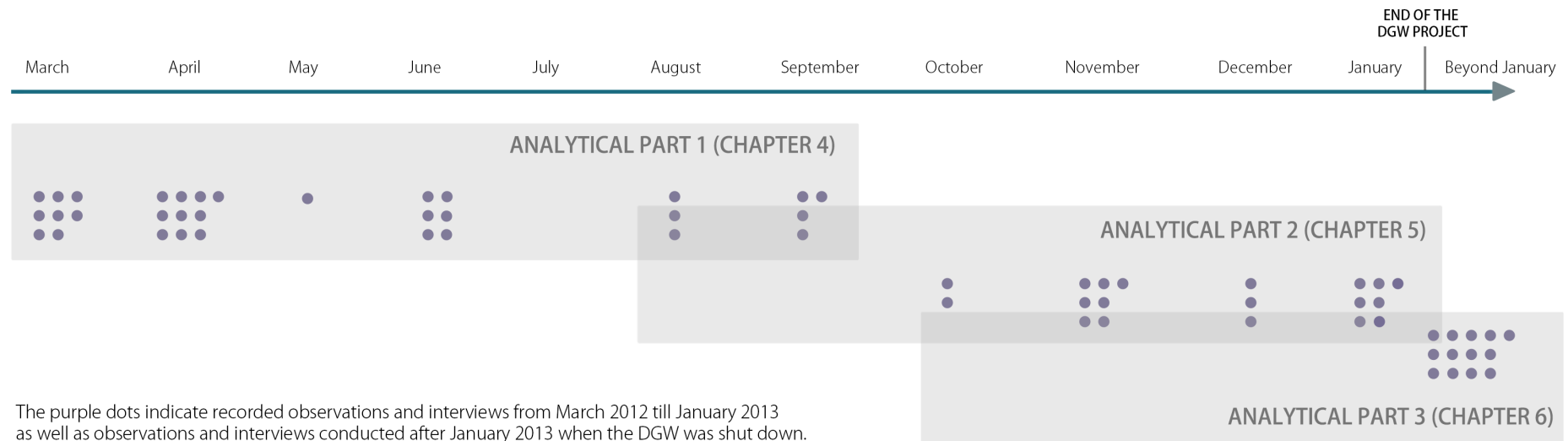
## Chapter 6: Analysis Part 3

- **Period:** This final analytical phase does not represent a specific period during the DGW project, but rather takes point of departure in interviews held after the closing down of the DGW project. In this final article, I, along with co-author Sara Muhr, attempt to present a different perspective of the DGW project. A perspective that in my view, after having followed the project closely for 10 months, needs to be presented. As the project was formally concluded as ‘well-accomplished’, I became increasingly interested in the discrepancy between the formal version of a well-accomplished project and the conflicts encountered along the way. I therefore started to hold interviews with the particular aim of debating some of the otherwise unarticulated aspects that, according to several employees, made this project ‘particularly political’.
- **Representation of the empirical material:** In this final phase, we investigate the premise that eventually made the DGW project ‘a political endeavour’. It shows the desire for resources, the political struggles, and the lack of engagement with employees beyond corporate functions, thereby providing insights into why events unfolded as they did during

the DGW project. In this final phase, the analytical focal point is how a representation of a diverse workforce is assembled through a cascade of events, both involving key decisions made by the project team as well as other contextual dynamics beyond the control of the team. In this retrospective paper, we trace some of the earliest causes of events that situated the DGW project in the particular context.

Figure 1 on the following page illustrates the way these three phases each draw on empirical material related to specific periods during the DGW project development.

**Figure 1:** How the three empirical papers connect according to the collection of the empirical material.



Chapter 4, the first analytical part, roughly accounts for the first five months of my participation in the DGW project, while Chapter 5, the second analytical part, roughly accounts for the subsequent five months. The final analytical part, Chapter 6, accounts for the final phase of the DGW project and incorporates interviews held after the closing down of the DGW project. While the papers all contribute to the overall research question (RQ1), they also comprise a second common thread, namely, that each paper refers to a specific period during the development of the DGW project. Thus, the papers can be said to represent specific periods and draw on empirical material obtained at different periods during the project (see figure above).

# CHAPTER 4: ANALYSIS PART 1

- Article 2 -

## **Applying a grounded intersectional perspective to organizational practice: How dominant employee categories emerge**

(Author: Mikkel Marfelt)

### **Keywords**

Grounded intersectionality, workforce diversity, social identity categorization

### **Abstract**

This paper contributes to the debate over the methodological advancement of intersectional studies (Nash, 2008; Walby et al., 2012; Zanoni et al., 2010) by presenting a grounded intersectional study (Tatli and Özbilgin, 2012b) of employee categorization in a large Scandinavian biopharmaceutical company. Although the extant studies within the field of intersectionality acknowledge the importance of empirically grounded contributions, critics have recently noted that such studies are relatively underdeveloped (Clycq, 2012; Dhamoon, 2011; Walby et al., 2012). Along the lines of Latour's suggestion to 'follow the actors' (Latour, 2005), this paper develops a method that 'follows identity categories' as they are created, transformed and translated in HRM work. Based on an ethnographic study covering a period of 10 months, the paper shows the emergence of two dominant identity categories: *generations* and *life situations*. The paper demonstrates how the construction and transformation of these categories help overcome discrepancies among various actor interests.

## Introduction

This paper seeks to methodologically advance intersectional studies (Zanoni et al., 2010; Nash, 2008; Walby et al., 2012) by presenting a grounded intersectional study (Tatli and Özbilgin, 2012b). Intersectional research – the study of interactions among socially constructed categories of differentiation (Crenshaw, 1989) – has evolved into a multifaceted and heterogeneous field. As such, it offers multiple entry points for the study of various social phenomena (Tatli and Özbilgin, 2012b; Walby et al., 2012). While extant intersectional studies acknowledge the importance of empirically grounded contributions, critics have recently noted that such studies are relatively underdeveloped (Clycq, 2012; Cole, 2009; Dhamoon, 2011; Walby et al., 2012; Zanoni et al., 2010). This is due, at least in part, to the methodological impasse that intersectional studies have faced in recent years (McCall, 2005; Nash, 2008). According to Nash (2008), “intersectionality’s relative inattention to methodology has been explained by the difficulty of crafting a method adequately attentive to ‘the complexity that arises when the subject of analysis expands to include multiple dimensions of social life and categories of analysis’ (McCall, 2005: 1772)” (Nash, 2008, p. 5).

To address this impasse, this paper applies an analytical framework that adopts both post-structural and non-essentialist perspectives on categories while recognising the temporal stability of social categories as quasi-entities that may be analysed. In applying this analytical framework to an empirical setting, this paper makes two key contributions. First, this paper contributes to the debate on methodological advancements in intersectional studies (Zanoni et al., 2010; Nash, 2008; Walby et al., 2012). Second, this paper makes an empirical contribution by presenting an emic study of social categorization in practice (Tatli and Özbilgin, 2012b). The empirical case is a human resource management (HRM) project in which practitioners set out to classify members of the company’s workforce into categories as part of a global diversity project. As the paper shows, these employee categories partly evolve from *age* and partly comprise locally constructed employee categories.

Contrary to many intersectional studies showing how identity is performed or demonstrating that dominant identity categories are experienced as oppressive, this paper shows how practitioners create and rework employee categories to fit specific practices and interests within a global HRM division. Thus, the paper does not address the effects of identity categories as experienced by employees, but rather how these categories are produced in the pre-implementation stages of a strategic HRM project. The paper provides some rare insights into

the strategic work that occurs before employee categories become an integral part of organizational work practices. In other words, the paper explores the high-level design process in which employee categories are negotiated on the corporate level and have, therefore, not yet been black-boxed.

As part of the analytical framework, the paper highlights a series of ‘critical steps’ that mark important milestones in the development of employee categories. Similar to Latour’s suggestion to ‘follow the actors’ (Latour, 2005), the aim of the paper is to ‘follow the identity categories’ as they evolve and transform. The central analytical objects are the employee categories and how they evolve given a complex mix of interests and controversies. Intersectionally, ‘following the categories’ means focusing on how empirically represented categories support and/or oppose each other, and how they are co-dependent – that is, how they intersect. In so doing, this paper centres on inter- and intra-categorical characteristics (McCall, 2005), and it explores changes within and between categories as they evolve. The paper departs from the following research questions: *How do practitioners classify employees? What are the relations among those employee categories?*

## **Theoretical positioning and methodological framework**

### ***A review of intersectionality***

Crenshaw introduced the term *intersectionality* in her influential paper “Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory, and Antiracist Politics” (Crenshaw, 1989):

Intersectionality [is] a provisional concept linking contemporary politics with postmodern theory. In mapping the intersections of race and gender, the concept does engage dominant assumptions that race and gender are essentially separate categories. By tracing the categories to their intersections, I hope to suggest a methodology that will ultimately disrupt the tendencies to see race and gender as exclusive or separable (Crenshaw, 1991, p. 1244)

As a black female feminist, Crenshaw used the metaphor of intersecting roads to explain how gender and racial discrimination intersect in a multi-axis framework. She argued that “a focus on either race or sex ... subsequently failed to consider how marginalized women are vulnerable to both grounds of discrimination; thus, even a combination of studies about women



and studies about race often erased the experiences of black women” (Dhamoon, 2011, p. 231). Crenshaw’s work, which resides in the feminist discussion on intersecting oppressions, has set the agenda for most intersectional studies (Bagilhole, 2010; Purdie-Vaughns and Eibach, 2008). In fact, intersectionality is often cited as “the most important theoretical contribution that women’s studies ... has made so far” (McCall, 2005, p. 1771). However, the concept faces an inherent problem. In acknowledging multiple-axis intersections, intersectionality embraces complexity (Acker, 2012; McCall, 2005), making it difficult to reduce and simplify intersectional problems.

Historically, intersectionality has been linked to anti-essentialist thinking. Therefore, identity categories are often conceptualized as ‘fluid’ and under constant negotiation (see, for example, Adib and Guerrier, 2003; Benschop, 2009; Briskin, 2008; Browne and Misra, 2003; Crenshaw, 1991; Diedrich et al., 2011; Holvino, 2010; Howard, 2000; Irvine, 2003; Mattis et al., 2008; McCall, 2005; Mehrotra, 2010; Richardson, 2007; Styhre and Eriksson-Zetterquist, 2008). Although Crenshaw’s early work focused on how gender and race could not be seen as separable, the fluidity of identity categorization, in principle, applies to all identity categories. To pay respect to the varying conditions that construct oppression and privilege, ‘context’ and ‘the everyday life of the subjects’ have been two central, recurring themes in intersectionality research. However, contrary to what might be expected, the popularity of intersectionality has not resulted in an abundance of empirical studies (see, for example, Adib and Guerrier, 2003; Essers and Benschop, 2007, 2009; Zanoni et al., 2010). Moreover, many studies have taken their point of departure in a priori defined and often theoretically dominant identity categories, such as gender, class and race (sometimes referred to as the ‘gender-class-race trinity’; Fine and Burns, 2003). McCall (2005) touches upon this issue, noting that the construction of a comprehensive intersectional methodology is hindered by the “complexity that arises when the subject of analysis expands to include multiple dimensions of social life and categories of analysis” (McCall, 2005, p. 1772). Thus, despite the popularity of intersectionality, the field has experienced little diversification into new, unexplored conceptualizations of identities. Instead, researchers in this area have paid more attention to a few theoretically and historically dominant identity categories (Dhamoon, 2011).

### ***An emic and grounded methodological approach***

Recent research on intersectionality has called for empirically grounded conceptualizations of categories. One such call can be found in Tatli and Özbilgin (2012b), who discuss how future

research could benefit from an emic approach – that is, the study of a posteriori created identity categories (Tatli and Özbilgin, 2012b). In their discussion the study of diversity in organizational workforces, these scholars note that an emic perspective “identifies emergent and situated categories of diversity *ex post*, as embedded in a specific time and place” (Tatli and Özbilgin, 2012b, p. 180). They advocate for this grounded approach because it is sensitive to the emergence of new categories of difference. More broadly, “[a]n emic approach investigates how local people think. How do they perceive and categorise the world?” (Kottak, 2005, p. 53). ‘Emic’ refers to an analysis based on local observations that uses local categories and local explanations. Contrary ‘etic’ research involves the study of categories defined a priori to engaging in an empirical setting - for example guided by conventional categories already existing within the body of literature or guided by the researcher’s perspective rather than the culture he or she is studying.

The framework applied in this paper relies on three central aspects. First, it originates from traditional (critical) diversity scholarship. In this regard, it is process oriented but emphasizes stable concepts as central to the analysis. Second, it does not give primacy to oppression, which is a typical element of the mainstream intersectional research. Third, it adopts a critical stance on the nature of the macro, meso and micro levels as dominant analytical perspectives. In particular, I focus on the following questions:

- Which social categories, if any, are represented in the empirical material?
- Are explicit or implicit assumptions made about social categories or about relations among social categories?
- How do represented and/or absent categories support or oppose each other?
- How do the representation of the categories and their intersections shift over time or across contexts?

The adoption of an empirically grounded approach overcomes, at least in part, some of the earlier critiques of the use of intersectional theory in practice. For example, Cronin and King (2010, p. 884) stress that “applying intersectionality theory can be problematic because decisions about which categories should be included are reflexive, selective tasks (Taylor, 2009)”. In contrast to an *ex ante* set of categories, the study of empirically grounded categories helps shift the focus from historically dominant categories, thereby adding new perspectives to the research. Intersectional research that uses an emic approach helps scholars look beyond

conventional identity formation. As such, it can be viewed as part of a critical distancing from theoretically dominant identity categories, such as the gender-class-race trinity “invoked so frequently that it has been called a mantra” (Cole, 2009, p. 171).

The main analytical categories dealt with in this paper were created, explicated and used by the practitioners. In other words, the dominant categories mentioned in this paper were those that took centre stage over time among practitioners in their daily work on classifying the workforce. Therefore, the paper presents a case of practitioners constructing employee categories. In a grounded and processual perspective, such as the one adopted in this paper, categories derived through an emic approach – those categories created, articulated and used by practitioners – are treated as temporally stable for analytical purposes, although the nature of these categories is not given based on essentialist grounds. The framework applied in this paper subscribes to the notions of inter- and intra-categorical (McCall, 2005), as it assumes the “provisional use of categories” (McCall, 2005, p. 1785), acknowledges the stable and even durable relationships that social categories represent at any given point in time, and “maintains a critical stance toward categories” (McCall, 2005, p. 1774). Therefore, this paper encompasses a post-structural and a non-essentialist perspective on categories, while it simultaneously recognises the temporal stability of social categories as quasi-entities that can be analysed. Thus, the paper subscribes to Walby et al.’s argument that “the way forward is to recognize that concepts need to have their meaning temporarily stabilized at the point of analysis, even while recognizing that their social construction is the outcome of changes and interactions over time” (2012, p. 236).

## **Research design and method**

I undertook an ethnographic study of a diversity project in a large Scandinavian company, PharmaTech (pseudonym). My goal was to provide a thick description and explanation of the unfolding content and outcomes of the project team’s work to conceptualise a diverse and global workforce. I used participant-observation techniques, conducted formal and informal interviews, and collected documentary materials as part of my fieldwork. The quotes presented in this paper have been selected because they portray how employee categories were debated, contested and reworked.

Over the course of the 10-month data-collection period, I participated in and observed three or four two-hour project meetings per week. I audio-recorded 90% of those meetings (about 150 hours of recorded meetings). Ten formal interviews – both unstructured and semi-structured –

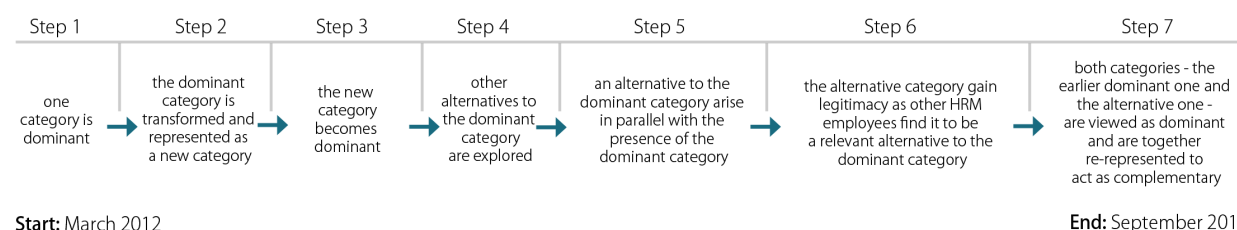
were held, and I undertook numerous informal interviews about the project. To ensure an ethical approach, my identity and interests were made clear to all participants. I attended scheduled meetings and interviews, but I also followed my intuition in searching for new sources of information, researching interesting occurrences and rephrasing questions as they arose. Moreover, I actively participated in serendipitous conversations about unexpected issues. Therefore, even though specific techniques for data collection were deployed, my fieldwork relied on the kind of open approach envisaged by Czarniawska, who argues that “fieldwork knows no ‘method’; it relies on pragmatism, luck, and moral sensibility. The knowledge of a variety of techniques, and the will to innovate rather than follow static prescriptions of method books, remain central to the craft of fieldwork, as to all others” (2008a, p. 10).

In line with this approach, data collection, sense-making and analysis were iterative processes that occurred concurrently throughout the empirical study rather than in discrete temporal stages (Alvesson and Kärreman, 2011). Emergent theoretical hunches and intuitive sense-making led to the probing and testing of the constituent categories in subsequent data collection, which then served to refine, extend or negate the hunch. This approach fits well with emic intersectional thinking, as it has few analytical ambitions upfront. Instead, it “tries to minimize the a priori assumptions before the study can begin” (Czarniawska, 2008a, p. 18). Moreover, this approach allows for adaptation to unforeseen developments in the empirical data, thereby opening up to new explorations into unconventional types of social categorizations.

### ***Critical steps***

The story of how the categories evolved follows seven critical steps, which represent the different stages in which employee categories took distinct forms as they moved toward the final phase (see Figure 1). The final phase represents a period during which two employee categories took dominant positions. Figure 1, which provides an overview of how the employee categories evolved over time, is carefully unfolded in the ‘Analysis’ section.

**FIGURE 1:** In the analysis section, each critical step is accompanied by a figure pointing to changes in how employee categories were represented in HRM work. All seven critical steps are illustrated in this figure.



The segmentation of the complex and messy process of identity formation into critical steps serves two purposes. First, the critical steps represent the momentary representations of the employee categories as objects that can be analysed. Second, the critical steps demonstrate how the empirical data is segmented, making the steps the analytical points of comparison among the different stages of employee-category development. The reduction of the formation of employee categories into a series of ‘critical steps’ allows for the designation of units of analysis (Lindberg and Czarniawska, 2006). These designations represent the summation of everyday actions within a specific period of time in which employee categories were represented in distinct ways.

## **The empirical setting**

### ***The Diverse and Global Workforce Project***

As a large, successful Scandinavian technology company, PharmaTech employs several thousand people and it expects a significant expansion in its workforce in the coming decade. Most of this expansion is likely to happen outside Scandinavia, which will solidify the company’s footprint as a growing, global organization. The Diverse and Global Workforce Project, which is the focus of this paper, aimed to address this change by developing employee categories that could inspire the construction of new and shared corporate HRM processes and services that would better accommodate the increasingly globalized and diverse workforce.

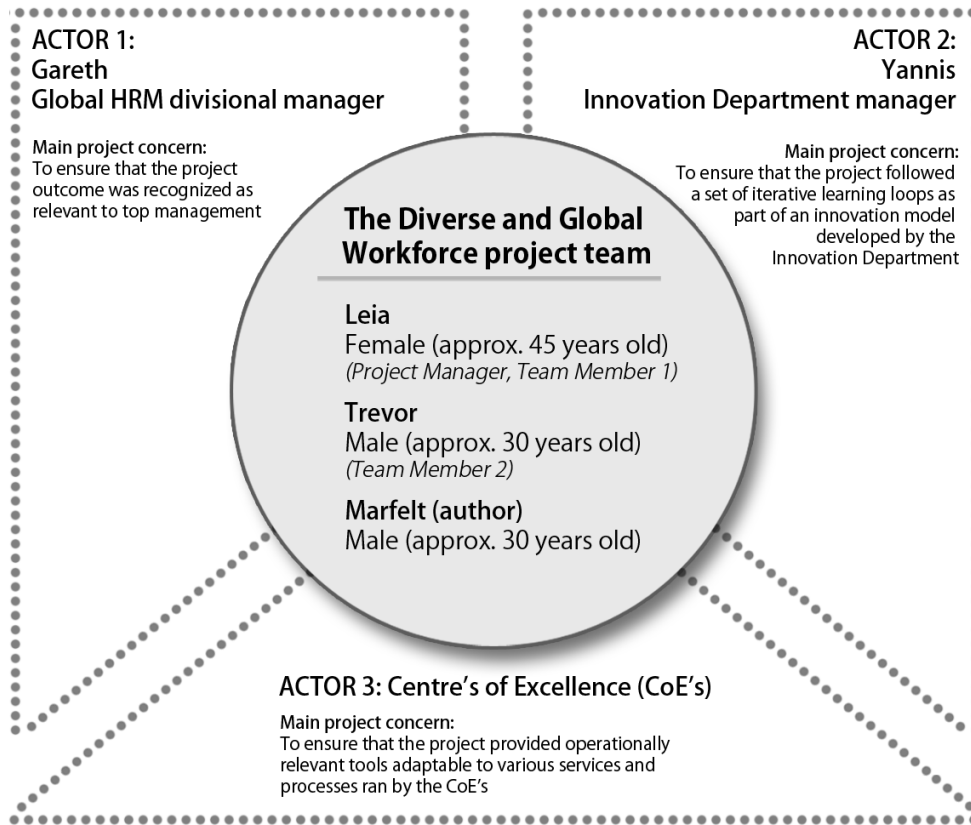
While at PharmaTech, I followed a team consisting of two central employees in the global HRM division. These two employees acted as key drivers of the Diverse and Global Workforce Project. These two employees as well myself made up the ‘project team’ shown in Figure 2. This team’s activities included participating in a consortium headed by the London Business School aimed at assessing and debating future workforce trends; seeking counselling and advice from various consultancy companies, such as PriceWaterhouseCoopers, on mapping external and internal workforce trends; and holding bi-weekly meetings on how to interpret and use information concerning the development of the company’s workforce obtained from various sources. Contrary to many HRM projects within the company, this project did not seek to provide HRM services (e.g., career counselling, performance management, diversity and inclusion work). Rather, it focused on the premises on which HRM services were constructed.

More specifically, it centred on how the prototypical ‘organizational employee’ was constructed from a corporate perspective.

Often, the project work resembled ongoing brainstorming with the goal of conceptualizing employees and the workforce in a new, more global and more diverse light. The project’s assumptions and motivations were vaguely defined, leaving it open for the team to set the direction. For example, two central assumptions were: 1) the workforce is becoming more diverse due to growth, globalization, and the increased age and generational composition and 2) customized people processes and HR services designed to meet the needs of the respective employee segments will optimize performance, drive motivation and enhance the ability to work. As my analysis shows, the project team developed two sets of specific employee categories in an attempt to serve high-level strategic interests and to provide HRM practitioners with practical tools for use in their daily work.

The Diverse and Global Workforce Project had an unconventional reporting structure. In contrast to other projects within the company, which were situated within one division, the Diverse and Global Workforce Project was formally situated in the innovation department, while the members of the project team were situated in the global HRM division. The innovation department was known for facilitating projects characterized by ‘uncertainty and ambiguity’, and its projects were typically described as standing out from the organizational culture. Notably, the global HRM division had typically led conventional projects. As the project was framed as an innovation department initiative but managed by the global HRM division, the team members had to simultaneously report to the innovation-department manager, Yannis, and the global HRM division manager, Gareth. These two actors, who were located in different areas of the organization, had different agendas. This setup created a troublesome environment in which both parties had to be taken into account. An understanding of the emergence of employee categories portrayed in this paper requires an understanding of this structural setup. However, as these two parties were not the only central actors influencing the project, the analysis encompasses a multipolar conflict involving three main actors (actors 2-4 in Figure 2) as well as the project team itself. The four central actors are: 1) the project team, 2) the global HRM divisional manager (Gareth), 3) the innovation-department manager (Yannis), and 4) the Centres of Excellence (CoEs – specific sub-departments within the global HRM division) (see Figure 2 below).

**FIGURE 2:** Actors constituting the tri-polar conflict (the team adopted a mediating role between actors 2, 3 and 4)



## Analysis

In the following, each critical step is presented and debated. The steps are also illustrated in a sequence of figures portraying the development of the employee categories (Figures 3-9). The analysis reveals how the controversies and diverging interests among the actors led to a specific conceptualization of the company's global workforce, which is exemplified in the particular employee categories that were shaped by the various actors. The quotes presented here stem from observations of team meetings and one-to-one interviews. Most team meetings included the following participants: Leia, a project manager in her 40s, who is referred to as Team Member 1; Trevor, a man around 30, who is referred to as Team Member 2; and myself, whom I refer to as Marfelt. The meetings often took place from 9:00 to 12:00, and they were occasionally followed by afternoon meetings. They were held two or three times a week in peak periods, and every second or third week in off-peak periods. The meetings were consensus based, meaning everyone could bring in new inputs and decisions were generally decided in plenum, thereby ensuring consent from all participants. Tasks were distributed at the end of each meeting and work done between meetings was presented at the next meeting.

## ***Step 1: Age must be included***

**FIGURE 3:** Step 1, the first step in the series of critical steps, illustrates an early project period in which age was debated as the dominant employee category.

Step 1



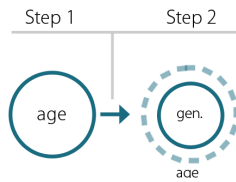
In one of the earliest meetings, the team tried to figure out how to deal with the task at hand. Gareth, the divisional manager, had pointed out early on that he would like to see a project developing around *age* as a central employee category. Contrary to other employee attributes that might change over time in radical or unforeseen ways, such as nationality or disability level, age is registered when new employees are hired and they change in a predictable manner. This, therefore, seemed to be a convenient employee category to utilize when attempting to forecast workforce trends and when establishing globally applicable employee categories. The quote below shows Trevor's (Team Member 2) reflections concerning the need to incorporate age as an essential part of the Diverse and Global Workforce Project. The quote below reveals that although the project was intended to be an open and innovative project, it had the clear constraint of having to focus on age. Despite the team's ambition to 'focus on the whole', Trevor indicates that doing so required the team members to engage in a 'careful' balancing act between the team's ambitions to construct new categories and the need to focus on age as required by Gareth.

**Trevor (Team Member 2):** We need to be careful. We need to live up to the focus on age, which we have been set out to do... and how to handle the fact that there are interdependencies among generations, discussions about age, geographical placement and other things... even though we have been asked to focus on age, we must still focus on the whole... Right now, we are discussing semantics – just so you know [addressing Marfelt]. It is political – how the project is framed... how everything has to be secondary to age... how it has to shine a light on age using various tools of dialogue – all under the umbrella of 'age'.



## Step 2: Generations are introduced

**FIGURE 4:** This figure illustrates how generations became a preferable alternative to age. The solid line around ‘generations’ indicates that generations took centre stage in step 2, while the dotted line around ‘age’ indicates how age became less dominant as the focus shifted from age to generations.



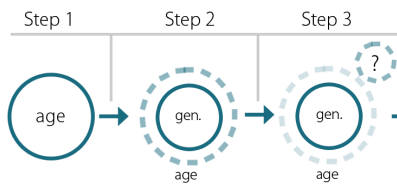
The focus on age seemed to be an inescapable part of the project, as company ‘politics’ seemed to require such a focus. However, the innovation-department manager encouraged the team to question existing organizational practices and break with the organizational culture, thereby motivating the team to continue its search for new approaches to workforce classification. This meant the project team quickly developed an aspiration to show that a focus on age alone was insufficient, as it failed to provide enough novelty in the rethinking of global employee categories. According to the team, this explorative approach included a critical stance towards age as a primary social category. Therefore, Gareth’s preference for age seemed to conflict with the more explorative risk-taking approach emphasized by Yannis. However, in order to avoid the significant direct conflict likely to arise if age was completely disregarded, employee age was re-interpreted as consisting of five *generations*, which together spanned a full career. Age was therefore not disregarded but circumvented, while generations became the dominant employee category.

**TABLE 1:** Generations and their relation to Age

Generation	Age span
Traditionalists	Born before 1945
Baby boomers	Born after World War 2 (from 1946 to mid-1960s)
Generation X	Born mid-1960s to late 1970s
Generation Y	Born early 1980s to mid-1990s
Generation Z	Born after mid-1990s

### Step 3: A conflict between two main actors

**FIGURE 5:** This figure illustrates how age became less dominant as the team became increasingly critical of age as the central category. The smaller dotted circle with a question mark indicates that the team started to explore other employee categories as requested by the innovation-department manager.



Start: March 2012

Throughout the 10-month process, employees often experienced the conflict as Yannis being more interested in the *process*, in how the project evolved as an ‘innovation project’ and in staying explorative (by, for example, developing new and unconventional employee categories), while Gareth was more interested in the *outcome* of the project and its concrete usability in the global HRM division. The following conversation shows how Leia, a team member, was caught between the two:

**Leia (Team Member 1):** My role was clear. The innovation-department manager [Yannis] was like a monopoly... like a child that [Gareth, the divisional manager] could not reach. [Yannis] was sitting opposite, and I was in the Steering Committee trying to bridge the two [opposing sides]... I was trying to navigate within this setting...

**Trevor (Team Member 2):** It is all about knowing the end customer.

**Leia (Team Member 1):** Yeah, and I think the end customer is the divisional manager.

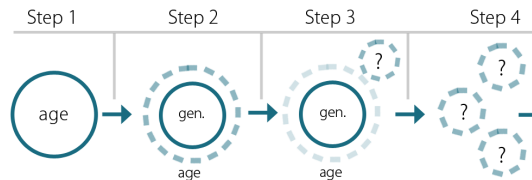
**Trevor (Team Member 2):** Then stay focused on what that end customer wants.

As Gareth, the divisional manager was the ‘end customer’ and the driver behind the focus on age, there was little doubt that age would play an important role in the project. However, as indicated earlier, the project team was also trying to push another agenda by showing that something other than generations could offer valuable inputs. The desire to comply with the direction set by the ‘end customer’ (the divisional manager) while also questioning organizational practices *and* staying explorative created an ambivalent and difficult situation for the team. As such, the team was caught between present and potential practices. It therefore eventually adopted a mediating role in which it tried to bridge these conflicting interests. This conflict had a direct impact on the way in which employee categories were produced. In trying

to bridge the two opposing actors, the team decided to keep generations as a central employee category (as requested by the divisional manager), and to start exploring other alternatives (as requested by the innovation-department manager).

### ***Step 4: Exploring new employee categories***

**FIGURE 6:** The team started to explore new employee categories, as illustrated by the three dotted circles containing question marks.

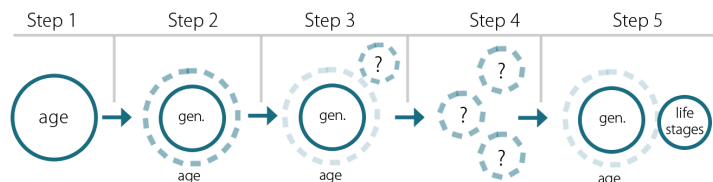


Start: March 2012

In its search for novel ways to conceptualize the workforce, the team held several meetings that emphasized free-associative thinking, and included discussions and reflections. The team discussed a range of possible traits, such as self-actualization, status, orientation, title, power and motivation, that might counterbalance generations. When entering this more explorative phase, the team invited consultants to participate in the brainstorming efforts. In forming the new employee categories, one of the primary concerns was to ensure that the divisional manager, the innovation-department manager and the CoEs all found the new categories relevant. Inputs from other sources were evaluated based on their relevance for the interests of the three actors, which demonstrates that the desires of the different actors played an essential role in the shaping of employee categories.

### ***Step 5: Life stages arise***

**FIGURE 7:** Step 5 illustrates the introduction of life stages as an alternative to generations.



Start: March 2012

Although many employee categories were debated, one conceptualization, *life stages*, took centre stage as an alternative. ‘Life stages’ refers to three specific categories: *full speed ahead* (a situation in which employees are ‘running full speed’ at work and performing their best), *balancing priorities* (a situation in which the employee decides to focus on non-work aspects of life, such as children), and *disruption* (a situation in which the employee is forced to focus on

aspects other than work, such as when family members fall ill and require care; see Table 2).

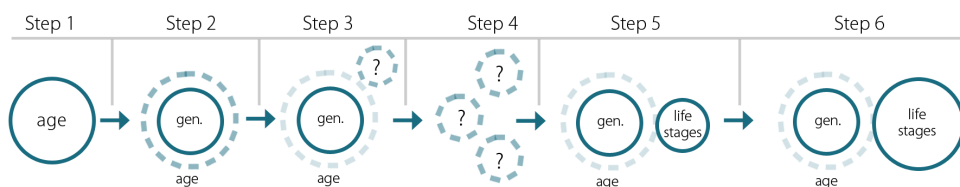
**TABLE 2:** The Life-stages categories

Life Stage	Description
Full speed ahead	Employee is ‘running full speed’ at work.
Balancing priorities	Employee decides to focus on non-work aspects of life, such as children.
Disruption	Employee is forced to focus on non-work aspects of life, such as when family members fall ill and require care.

The team found it difficult to couple age to more open and flexible employee categories, as requested by the innovation-department manager. Therefore, the team expressed an overwhelmingly positive attitude towards life stages, which it believed reflected some of the aspects that generations was lacking. In particular, the life-stages categorization was conceptualized as age-*independent*, thereby providing a counterbalance for the focus on age.

***Step 6: Centres of Excellence legitimize life stages***

**FIGURE 8:** The increased size of the life stages circle illustrates how life stages became increasingly dominant (as they were backed by some CoE employees, thereby legitimising life stages as a relevant employee category).



Start: March 2012

As part of the Diverse and Global Workforce Project, the team arranged workshops with Centres of Excellence (sub-departments within the global HRM division typically consisting of 5 to 20 employees; also referred to as CoEs) in order to present the project’s results and receive feedback on proposed new categories. A typical workshop included a presentation of ‘generations’ and ‘life stages’, followed by a debate on whether these two categories would contribute new and noteworthy inputs to the way practitioners ran their HRM services and

processes. The team spent a great amount of time trying to predict what each CoE would deem valuable in relation to its respective areas of expertise. This indicates that the opinions of the CoEs were important in shaping the categories. Furthermore, the attempt to create value for the CoEs seemed to have another underlying agenda: the project could be deemed successful if it was valuable to the operationally oriented CoEs.

The first workshops in which life stages and generations were presented together were held approximately one month after the initial conceptualization of life stages. The fact that the two categories were presented together indicates that they were equally dominant at this point in time. Several CoE employees openly expressed their preference for life stages, as indicated in the following quote, which is taken from a meeting with CoE employees:

**Trevor (Team Member 2):** There's a difference in how much people believe in [Generations] because it is segmentation... When you place people into segments, you make some cuts. What happens if people fall outside those cuts? Can [generations] handle this? Perhaps this is where the model does not fit well – when you set up generational segments... The CoEs are in an operational field where, if you make the boxes, people have to be in them. That is where these [Life Stages] works better because they offer some flexibility and provide a broader aim.

This quote shows how some members of the CoEs preferred life stages to generations due to the CoEs' operational context. According to the team member, the CoEs were well aware of the consequences of placing people into boxes. Utilization of the generations categorization meant that an employee would be linked to other employees of the same age, such that young, middle-aged and older employees would be separated into distinct generational categories. Furthermore, the discussions of life stages and generations exposed a tension between divisional management, which preferred age, and some CoE members, who preferred life stages. The following dialogue illustrates one employee's dislike for age as a dimension for segmentation:

**CoE Employee 1:** When I saw [life stages] the first time, I thought that it was something [to do with] age... when you are in your twenties, you are full speed ahead. Later, you are balancing priorities. But I understand now that it has nothing to do with age...

**Trevor (Team Member 2):** Absolutely not.

**CoE employee 1:** With [life stages], you can go in and out.

**Trevor (Team Member 2):** What we are trying to get away from is saying, ‘Okay, if you are twenty you are this. If you are sixty, you are this’. No, it is about when you are twenty, you might be full speed ahead, you could be balancing priorities or you could have disruptions.

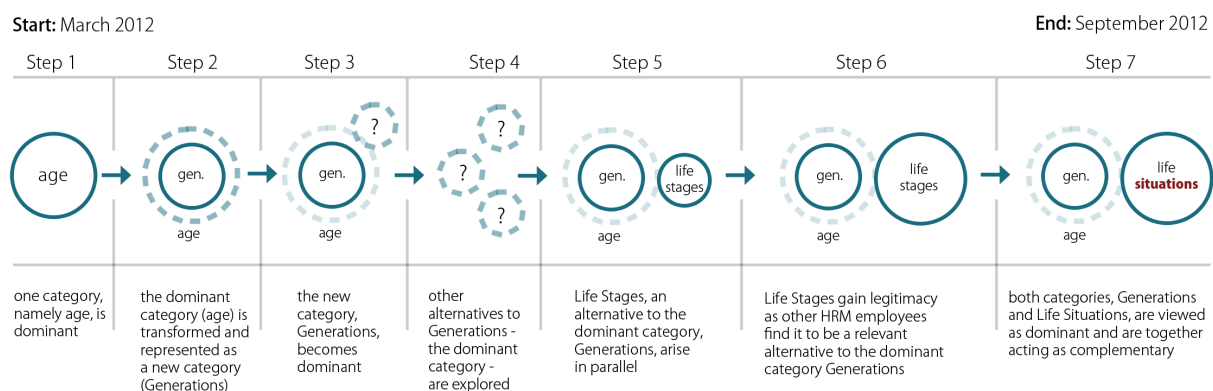
**CoE employee 2:** It is important to get away from... the age dimension.

**Trevor (Team Member 2):** Yes.

This conversation shows how one CoE employee believes it is important to “get away from the age dimension”. Notably, the phrase ‘in and out’ was often used in presentations and in meetings with CoEs in order to emphasise the flexibility offered by life stages. Some CoE employees associated ‘generations’ with other employee characteristics (one common assumption was that younger generations, such as generations Y and Z, performed better). The point of life stages was to avoid these assumptions, as life stages were not linked to a particular age or generation. One could, for example, be an older, full speed ahead (high-performing) employee.

### ***Step 7: From Stages to Situations***

**Figure 9:** This figure offers an overview of the change in focus from age to generations, the emergence of life stages, and the shift toward life situations. In Step 7, the life-stages categorization was changed to life situations in an attempt to ensure that employees perceived this category as intended by the team, especially in terms of viewing life situations as oppositional to generations with regards to age (life situations were conceptualized as age-independent).



The aim of questioning existing organizational practices and constructing new employee categories based on more flexible categories is evident from the fact that life stages became

increasingly dominant. In this regard, a significant change took place. Life stages was renamed *life situations*. One of the main architects of this change tells the story behind the name change.

**Trevor (Team Member 2):** [The word *situations* as opposed to *stages*] was introduced to break with the linear perception of age, as in early – mid – late... old and young... or generation X... and so on. In this linear perception, you have 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10... very linear thinking. We instead say... let us make something where employees can fluctuate. Something employees can get in and out of. Something much more dynamic... ‘Situations’... That's the best that came to mind. We could, perhaps, work some more on the name and figure out a cooler expression for something non-linear and fluid.

This quote reveals how team members renamed life stages to life situations in order to keep CoE employees from associating the three employee categories that make up life stages (i.e., full speed ahead, balancing priorities and disruption) with the linearity of generations. The problem arose because some employees misunderstood life stages as being closely linked to generations. As generations are consecutive and as an employee cannot change his or her position within the generational continuum (i.e., an employee born in the 1950s is a ‘Baby Boomer’ regardless of how young that employee feels or how well that employee performs), some employees assumed that the same was true for life stages. The change in the label from stages to situations was an attempt to avoid the associations made by some CoE employees when the word ‘stages’ was mentioned in workshops. The problem is apparent in the previous quote, where a CoE employee is confused as to what the word ‘stages’ relates to: “*When I saw [Life Stages] the first time, I thought that it was something [to do with] age... when you are in your twenties, you are full speed ahead. Later, you are balancing priorities. But I understand now that it has nothing to do with age*”. Life stages were changed to *life situations* in order to avoid possible associations between age/generations and life stages. Initially, the concept of life stages was meant to reflect age-independency. As such, having people associating them with generations defeated their purpose, which led to the change of name to life situations. In other words, the change of name was an attempt to ensure that age-independency and flexibility were viewed as central parts of life situations, as employees could move ‘in and out’ of life situations and they were not necessarily consecutive.

The table below summarizes four key attributes of the construction of life situations and generations as complementary employee categories that accommodate conflicting interests.

**TABLE 3:** Central and complementary attributes of Life Situations and Generations

<b>Life Situations</b>	<b>Generations</b>
<p><b>Age independent (not related to age)</b> Life Situations are disassociated from age – preferred by some CoE employees</p>	<p><b>Age dependent</b> Generations are based on age – preferred by the divisional manager</p>
<p><b>Non-linear/non-consecutive</b> No given order – preferred by some CoE employees</p>	<p><b>Linear/consecutive</b> Ordered according to age</p>
<p><b>Accessible to outsiders/flexible</b> Employees can go ‘in and out’ of life situations – emphasized by the project team as a positive category trait</p>	<p><b>Inaccessible to outsiders/rigid</b> Employees cannot move into another generation, as generational classifications are determined by employee age</p>
<p><b>Not measurable</b> IT systems cannot measure life situations or pull data on them</p>	<p><b>Measurable</b> Age is registered upon hiring; generations can therefore be determined by pulling data from IT systems</p>

## Discussion and conclusion

### *Theoretical and methodological implications for intersectional research*

The empirical material presented in this paper shows how practitioners produce and transform employee categories in an attempt to conceptualize a diverse and global workforce. The paper presents an emic study of social categorization in practice (Tatli and Özbilgin, 2012b). The novelty of this approach lies in the analytical framework, that both acknowledges temporal stability of emic derived social-identity categories (i.e., employee categories stabilized as temporal representations in the seven critical steps), while also demonstrating how employee categorization and, more broadly, workforce conceptualization is an ongoing process influenced by organizational interests. This points to the anti-essentialist nature of these employee categories, as they are never defined as fully formed entities, but rather constantly evolving.

One reason for intersectionality’s popularity lies in its processual focus (Eriksson-Zetterquist and Styhre, 2007). The adoption of a processual perspective, such as the one used in this paper, is neither new nor controversial. However, the debate regarding what constitutes a



processual perspective must be nuanced. The risk of a dynamic/processual perspective is that it might disregard what we might refer to as ‘stable concepts’. The study presented in this paper contributes to the debate regarding methodological advancements in intersectional studies (Zanoni et al., 2010; Nash, 2008; Walby et al., 2012) by suggesting the need to adopt a nuanced processual perspective in order to conceptualize social identity categories in new ways.

When scholars ascribe to one of the three distinct demarcations of intersectional research presented by McCall (2005) (i.e., anti-, intra- and inter-categorical intersectionality), they risk overlooking the fact that these three approaches should be conceptually understood as a continuum (McCall, 2005). Recognition of the interdependencies among the three approaches is important because they do not necessarily exclude each other (McCall, 2005; Yuval-Davis, 2011). Instead, the different approaches point to different facets of social analysis. Therefore, contrary to the types of analysis that these demarcations might foster, the study presented in this paper “crosses the boundaries of the continuum, belonging partly to one approach and partly to another” (McCall, 2005, p. 1774). More specifically, the analysis honours social categories as provisionally stable in order to allow them to be analysed. It simultaneously points to the fluidity of these categories over time. Such an analysis can be said to constitute a “compromise devised to embrace both the anti-essentialist aspects of all organizing (organizing never stops) and its apparently solid effects (for a moment things seem unchangeable and organized for good)” (Czarniawska, 2004, p. 780) .

Second, as shown in this paper, an emic perspective highlights the need for a critical assessment of the contextual relevance of otherwise theoretically dominant identity categories, such as the gender-class-race trinity (Cole, 2009; Fine and Burns, 2003). To keep intersectionality from evolving into a field in which theoretical primacy is given to a small group of selected identity categories, we should foster research that investigates a wide range of differences (Dhamoon, 2011). For example, it would have been equally legitimate and possible to apply a conventional intersectional perspective, such as those found in investigations of gender, class and/or race oppressive circumstances, to this paper. However, contrary to an etic analysis departing in theoretically defined categories, this paper focuses on one theoretically well-known social category, *age*, simply because that category happens to be created and made dominant by practitioners in the empirical material. More importantly, this paper shows how locally constructed categories (i.e., life situations) achieve a dominant position in the given context.

This paper represents a small step on the road to a comprehensive field of what might be termed ‘grounded social categorization’ or ‘grounded intersectionality’ research. Hopefully, such studies will increase in the coming years, thereby nuancing intersectional research and, from a broader perspective, providing a window into the complex nature of identity formation. This will provide a much-needed theoretical counterbalancing of the dominant categories within the field, thus shifting the balance from domination by a few, selected categories toward a field populated by a multitude of different conceptualizations of identity.

In light of this discussion, it is worth noting how the primacy given to oppression has led to what Martinez (1993) calls ‘oppression Olympics’ in which marginalized groups compete for the mantle of ‘most oppressed’. Dhamoon relates this point to the gender-class-race trinity by noting how “the priority assigned to the race–class–gender trinity has often meant that some forms of oppression are explained as more damaging than others (Monture, 2007, p. 199)” (2011, p. 234) The question is whether the debate around oppression is the main – or only – discussion we wish to have. Perhaps we should adopt a critical view of this primacy and reconsider oppression as just one entrance point for understanding differences among people in an intersectional perspective. Contrary to most intersectional studies, a discussion of oppression is not central to the study presented here, which shows that emic intersectional studies have the potential to uncover new methods that can turn oppression into a peripheral conversation. Such studies may lead to novel conceptualizations of ‘intersections’ as manifold, messy and disordered, forcing us to rethink whether we have given priority to the most relevant identity categories, or simply embraced and reproduced the historical (and structural) baggage associated with intersectional theorization (Dhamoon, 2011; see Omanovic, 2009, for a discussion of the socio-historical legacy, as well as the dialectic processual characteristics found in diversity studies in general).

### ***Practical implications***

The empirical material presented in this paper shows how employee categories are created and transformed in order to appeal to different groups of actors. The project team produced the employee categories with the goal of accommodating interests among different influential actors related to the project. This finding matches one of the fundamental assumptions of intersectionality – that identity categories not only intersect but are also deeply interrelated, mutually dependent, and in ongoing negotiation with other emergent categories as well as additional contextual factors. Contrary to many intersectional studies, the case presented here

does not show how identity is performed or experienced. Instead, it provides a glimpse of the machinery that makes up the corporate-level conceptualization of a diverse workforce.

Surprisingly, however, the study shows that the work of practitioners mimics some of the rationalities central to intersectionality. Consider, for example, the fact that one team member openly states that the change from life stages to life situations is a strategic move aimed at ensuring that employees appreciate the *fluidity* embedded in these types of employee categories. This suggests that practitioners conceptualize employee categories as fluid and processual, which is characteristic of an anti-essentialist view on categorization. Similarly, consider the fact that generations and life situations are complementary in certain aspects (see Table 3), which implies that practitioners are aware of and construct employee categories according to the intersections among them. Notably, the practitioners not only consider the intersections among dominant categories but also strategically position the categories to appeal to different interests among conflicting actors. In a funambulist balancing-act, the categories become negotiating actors.

As noted in the introduction, this paper aimed to ‘follow the identity categories’. This analysis of how the categories develop and transform serves as a window into how the team circumnavigates conflicting attempts to control the project. This implies that categories should not be seen as inputs or outcomes, but instead viewed as playing a double role of being constituted by others while being performative. Given this realization, I encourage practitioners to question the implementation of top-down postulations and expectations when forming broadly applicable employee categories. Moreover, this project may inspire top-level managers to carefully consider how organizational actors and the control they exert, affect projects such as the one presented here. While top-level managers might focus on certain conceptualizations of a global workforce, they should not disregard contextual factors that influence such conceptualizations. For example, local work practices often depend on certain locally derived conceptualizations that do not necessarily align with high-level strategic conceptualizations of the workforce. In particular, this study highlights the necessity of critically examining how such projects are situated within the organization so that the actors engaged in their management are carefully considered. This will, for example, help avoid unfortunate discrepancies between expectations and interests, such as those evident among the innovation-department manager, the divisional manager and the various CoEs.

*(Here ends Article 2. References are listed at the end of the dissertation in Chapter 8)*

# CHAPTER 5: ANALYSIS PART 2

- Article 3 -

## **The ‘diverse workforce’ as a boundary concept: Towards new theoretical frontiers in workplace diversity research**

(Authors: Mikkel Marfelt, Gavin Jack and Signe Vikkelsø)

### **Keywords**

Boundary object, workforce diversity, temporality, science and technology studies (STS)

### **Abstract**

This paper addresses a conceptual and empirical shortcoming in the workplace diversity literature focused on diversity management (DM): the peripheral and poorly understood status of the workforce concept in approaches to studying and managing ‘a diverse workforce’. We introduce and demonstrate the analytical relevance of a novel theoretical perspective in DM research: the notion of boundary concepts. By applying this notion to a study of the social construction of ‘a diverse workforce’ in a corporate HRM project in a Scandinavian pharmaceutical company, we show how it can advance our understanding of ‘a diverse workforce’ and inform contemporary workforce diversity research. We also demonstrate how cooperation among different departments under the aegis of a global diversity project happens around a flexible and vaguely defined representation of ‘a diverse workforce’ – a representation that enables different and divergent local interpretations. We argue that future workforce diversity research could benefit from paying attention to how ‘a diverse workforce’ is produced as an ongoing effort *across* communities, and we suggest that scholars consider the boundary characteristics of the ‘diverse workforce’ concept.

## Introduction

This paper advances the theoretical frontiers in workplace diversity research by introducing the *boundary concept* (Löwy, 1992) and illustrating its analytic relevance through an ethnographic study of ‘a diverse workforce’ within a Scandinavian pharmaceutical company. Workplace diversity research has blossomed over the last three decades following the emergence of the diversity management (DM) (Oswick and Noon, 2014) approach in the US in the late 1980s (Cox and Blake, 1991; Thomas, 1990). DM has since been exported and adapted to different national and cultural contexts as a way of conceiving and subsequently managing a ‘new’ organizational problem – the ‘diverse workforce’ (Calas et al., 2009; Holvino and Kamp, 2009). Mainstream DM scholars and practitioners have devoted considerable attention to describing and mapping out ‘diversity’, and testing for correlations between diversity and a battery of work-related and organizational outcomes (Prasad et al., 2006).

This approach to managing workplace diversity has been criticized for objectifying human differences and essentializing diversity (Lorbecki and Jack, 2000; Prasad and Mills, 1997; Zanoni et al., 2010), and for casting the ‘diverse workforce’ as a predetermined notion (Tatli and Özbilgin, 2012b) that is not only undergoing change but also in need of stimulation and improvement through managerial intervention. Critical scholars have consequently called for more research that adopts an emic perspective (i.e., a perspective grounded in the local realities of organizational members rather than the *a priori* categories established by researchers) to improve our understanding of how organizations reproduce hierarchies of inequality and the organizational effects of diversity initiatives (Omanovic, 2009; Tatli and Özbilgin, 2012b).

The widespread attention paid to ‘diversity’ has blinded mainstream researchers and their critics to the concept’s other component: the ‘workforce’. The notion of the workforce is generally taken-for-granted, reified, under-problematized and under-researched by workplace diversity scholars. The workforce is assumed to have pre-determined yet unspecified characteristics, and these assumptions serve to reduce the issue of the ‘diverse workforce’ to an issue of ‘diversity’ alone. Not only does this approach reproduce a view of the workforce as simply a set of people engaged in or available for work (Stevenson and Lindberg, 2010), but it also fails to provide critical insights into the workforce concept and neglects to pose two key questions: How is ‘a diverse *workforce*’ constructed and enacted in an organizational setting? What are the effects of this construction and enactment? As this study offers empirical answers to such questions, it addresses a conceptual shortcoming in workplace diversity scholarship –

the lack of understanding of the organizational dynamics surrounding how the ‘workforce’ concept is utilized in the management of diversity.

In building on these empirical and conceptual insights, we offer a distinctive theoretical contribution to the field. We introduce, expose and evaluate an approach that is novel in organizational diversity research, as we conceive of ‘a diverse workforce’ as a *boundary concept*. Informed by boundary object theory (Star and Griesemer, 1989), ‘boundary concepts’ are loose concepts which have a strong cohesive power (Allen, 2009; Löwy, 1992) in social settings. In this paper, we refer to boundary concepts as the abstract or conceptual counterpart to the better-known term boundary object, which historically points to how certain material objects hold the capacity to enable collaboration despite a lack of consensus amongst collaborating social actors. Contrary to research in which scholars treat cooperation as relying upon shared cognitive schemes or shared values, boundary concepts articulate how collaboration is possible despite a lack of consensus in a social or organizational setting. This theoretical approach has the potential to illuminate the social and organizational construction of ‘a diverse workforce’. Given the two empirical research questions above, the primary theoretical research question guiding this paper is: How can a boundary-object perspective advance our understanding of ‘a diverse workforce’?

The paper is based on an ethnographic study of a team of people from different departments of a Scandinavian biopharmaceutical company undertaking a strategic human resources (HR) project entitled *The Diverse and Global Workforce Project*. We analyze how practitioners constructed multiple and shifting conceptualizations of a diverse workforce, and we show how and with what effects the workforce concept enabled collaboration among organizational actors despite disagreements about what that concept entailed. At the heart of our empirical account is the process through which representations of a diverse workforce shifted from being signified in terms of ever-more complex employee categories to being signified as fictional employee narratives. This transformation emerged as practitioners sought shared agreement on the nature of a diverse workforce within their organization. In short, we show how cooperation among the focal employees was affected by the emergence of a representation of a diverse workforce that was sufficiently flexible to enable divergent local interpretations to co-exist but not cohere. We conclude that the question of *how* the ongoing conceptualization of a diverse workforce enables or obstructs collaboration among members of organizations tasked with managing diversity must be introduced as a central and explicit issue within workplace diversity research.

This paper encompasses five key sections. The first section situates the problem of the ‘missing workforce’ within a selective overview of mainstream and critical diversity studies, and then offers a conceptual framing of the study within boundary objects/concepts scholarship. The next two sections describe the research setting, and outline and justify the study’s design, methods and mode of analysis. Section four presents the key findings: a series of temporally unfolding and shifting conceptualizations of a diverse workforce, which is illustrated through visual and verbal material. The final section provides a discussion and our conclusions.

## **‘Workforce’ in the workplace diversity literature**

While workplace diversity research covers a wide range of historical, disciplinary, empirical and practitioner-oriented concerns (Metcalf and Woodhams, 2012), the diversity management (DM) perspective that originated in the US is our primary area of concern. In contrast to the legally-mandated Equal Employment Opportunity (EEO)/Affirmative Action (AA) approach to assuring workplace equality, which proved unpopular with corporations (Kelly and Dobbin, 1998), DM represented a voluntary corporate and strategic response to the emerging demographic challenge of a changing and diverse workforce (Barak, 2005; Choudhury, 1996; Johnston and Packer, 1987). According to Kalonaityte (2010; see also Jonsen et al., 2011), the extant literature on DM falls into two broad streams. One stream focuses on the business case for diversity, as well as its implementation and internationalization. The second stream moves beyond the business case and includes the sub-field of critical diversity studies (e.g., Jonsen et al., 2013).

In the first research stream, the DM approach is characterized by a managerialist ethos that appeals to the ideas that human differences are identifiable and manageable, and that DM’s financial contribution (e.g., through cost savings or new revenue) to the organization’s balance sheet can be measured (Mighty, 1991; Robinson and Dechant, 1997). Furthermore, in this stream, the (putative) basis for managing workplace diversity shifts from the social group to a series of individually-based demographic and non-demographic (visible and invisible) differences (Jackson, 1992; Roberson, 2013; Brief, 2008). For instance, Konrad et al. (2006) survey how scholars’ focus on various diversity dimensions, including nationality, race, gender, class, age, disability, functional background, educational background, tenure, and surface- and deep-level characteristics (see also Alcázar et al., 2013). Moreover, mainstream cognitive and social psychological scholarship and positivist approaches to DM research have tested for

correlations between selected diversity dimensions and a variety of organizational-, work- and performance-related outcomes (Jehn et al., 1999; Pelled et al., 1999; Richard et al., 2000;). Under the aegis of diversity management, therefore, workforce diversity became a manageable commodity, a researchable phenomenon, and a pre-existing and reified social fact.

Zanoni et al. (2010) characterize critical diversity studies – part of Kalonaityte’s (2010) second stream of research – as a critical response to corporation’s appropriation of equal opportunities based on the diversity business case. Along these lines, Wrench (2008) offers a comprehensive survey of the fundamental, non-fundamental and equal opportunity-based critiques of the intentions, assumptions and effects of this ‘diversity discourse’ (Sinclair, 2006). Crucially, Zanoni et al. (2010, p. 13) argue that the “positivistic ontology” underpinning dominant social psychological DM research serves to “naturaliz[e] identities into objective identities, rather than acknowledging their socially constructed nature”. This echoes Tatli and Ozbilgin’s (2012b) observation that the diverse workforce is typically treated as a predetermined notion. Omanovic (2009) suggests that failure to pay attention to the social processes through which diversity is constructed effectively strips away the roles played by context (see also Jonsen et al., 2013) and social interests in generating organizational understandings of workplace diversity. Consequently, a number of diversity scholars (Ahonen et al., 2014; Kalonaityte, 2010; Zanoni et al., 2010) advocate for more context-sensitive and empirical research into the social and organizational practices through which diversity is constructed and enacted in workplaces, as well as their social and organizational effects.

Although we respond to this invitation, we also note a shortcoming common in both streams of workplace diversity research with regard to the concept of ‘a diverse workforce’. Due to the primacy accorded to ‘diversity’, the ‘workforce’ is rendered peripheral or implicit at best. Based on a small, illustrative sample of diversity work (see Table 1), we suggest that the concept of the workforce disappears from scholarly concern because of the ways in which scholars inadvertently focus on ‘diversity’ when determining the scope of their research. The initial conceptual and empirical focus on a diverse workforce has, thereby, been reduced to a singular focus on diversity. This occludes an understanding of how the workforce concept is socially constructed and enacted, and an understanding of the accompanying social and organizational effects. To address this conceptual and empirical shortcoming, and to simultaneously widen the theoretical terrain of workplace diversity research, we introduce the idea of the ‘boundary concept’ to the field and demonstrate its analytic relevance.



**Table 1: 'Workforce diversity' in the literature**

Authors	Questions/problems raised	Answers provided
	<p><i>Note in the quotes below how 'workforce diversity' appears central when questions are raised.</i></p>	<p><b>When answers are provided, note either:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- <i>An inadvertent gliding between 'workforce diversity' and 'diversity', or</i></li> <li>- <i>How 'the workforce' becomes peripheral.</i></li> </ul>
<p>Alcazar et al., 2013</p>	<p><b>Workforce diversity</b> is considered one of the main challenges for human resource management in modern organizations. Despite its strategic importance, the majority of models in this field implicitly consider workforce as a generic and homogeneous category, and do not take into account cultural differences among employees...</p>	<p>The paper identifies four research questions that still need to be addressed: deeper analysis of the concept of diversity, introduction of psychological processes mediating the diversity-performance relationship, development of diversity oriented SHRM typologies and redefinition of performance indicators to measure the effects of diversity.</p> <p>- <i>While the workforce is recognized as a homogeneous and implicit category within workforce diversity, the solution is to call for a deeper analysis of the concept of <b>diversity</b>.</i></p>
<p>Jonsen et al., 2013</p>	<p>We identify two dilemmas that underscore the social tragedy of diversity and explain why they prevent <b>workforce diversity</b> from progressing: (1) voluntarism and (2) individualism.</p>	<p>We critique the simplistic models of managing diversity and suggest an alternative conceptualization as a way forward. A reframing of organizational self-interest and collective interests in the context of <b>diversity</b> is presented and solutions to social tragedy of diversity are proposed.</p> <p>- <i>Workforce diversity is studied as interests in the context of diversity.</i></p>
<p>Jonsen et al., 2011</p>	<p>This paper reviews <b>workforce diversity</b> literature and its research findings. We identify important gaps between the literature and the challenges of diversity management...</p>	<p>We conclude that the <b>diversity</b> field itself is not very diverse and has been dominated by US-centric research.</p> <p>- <i>Researchers inadvertently glide between the workforce diversity field and the diversity field.</i></p>
<p>Mighty, 1991</p>	<p>This paper describes the real and perceived impacts of increasing workforce diversity on organizations and various management approaches to dealing with the phenomenon.</p>	<p>This paper offers a model of management that values <b>diversity</b>, and seeks to reduce the negative consequences that may arise from conflicting racial and cultural interactions, while simultaneously seeking to maximize its potential benefits.</p>

<p>Richard and Miller, 2013</p>	<p>What are the organizational performance effects of <b>workforce diversity</b>, especially the visible attribute dimensions?</p> <p>What are the strategic and human resource management practices that managers can implement to maximize the positive effects of diversity while minimizing the potential negative effects?</p>	<p>- <i>Workforce diversity is studied as diversity dimensions (race and culture).</i></p> <p>In the new global age, <b>workforce diversity</b> has become widespread, drawing attention to not only previous studied dimensions of diversity such as functional background, educational background, and tenure but also more salient workforce diversity features such as national culture, race, gender, and age. This chapter[’s] .. major thrust is how more salient, visible dimensions of diversity affect organizational processes and ultimately firm performance.</p> <p>- <i>Workforce diversity is studied as diversity dimensions</i></p>
<p>Tatli and Özbilgin, 2012b</p>	<p>How do <b>workforce diversity</b> studies that are published in business and management journals treat diversity?</p>	<p>In answering this question, we paid particular attention to (1) which diversity strands are included in these studies; and (2) in what ways and to what extent multiple diversity categories are covered in a single study.</p> <p>- <i>Workforce diversity is studied as diversity dimensions</i></p>

## Boundary objects: Definitions and problems

Boundary-object theory, which originated in science and technology studies (STS), has been part of a growing body of thought in organizational studies for some time. Star and Griesemer’s (1989) classic work introduced the concept of *boundary objects* to specifically address the “problem of common representation”. A boundary object is a conceptual device used to explain how common representations exist despite diverse and sometimes conflicting values and assumptions in social settings. Researchers often treat cooperation as relying upon shared cognitive schemas or shared values. Contrary to this view, a boundary-object approach suggests that cooperation sometimes occurs *despite* a lack of consensus (Star, 2010). From a boundary-object perspective, common representation allows for collaboration among groups that do not share the same ‘local understanding’ of a concept. Therefore, boundary objects help us understand interactions among involved actors despite the lack of consensus these:

Boundary objects are objects which are both plastic enough to adapt to local needs and the constraints of the several parties employing them, yet robust enough to maintain a common identity across sites. (Star and Griesemer, 1989, p. 393)

As the literature on boundary objects has grown, the variety of objects under scrutiny has expanded. For example, some of the literature discusses boundary objects in the form of physical objects, such as standardized forms (Star and Griesemer, 1989), sketches (Henderson, 1991), design drawings (Bødker, 1998), IT objects (Briers and Chua, 2001), workflow matrices (Carlile, 2002) and prototypes (Bechky, 2003), or as abstract objects, such as conceptual artifacts (Fujimura, 1992), narratives (Bartel and Garud, 2003; Boland and Tenkasi, 1995), shared constructs (Kim and King, 2000), metaphors (Koskinen, 2005), and processes and methods (Swan et al., 2007). While the earliest publication on boundary objects centered on a material object (a museum) (Star and Griesemer, 1989), the popularity of boundary-object theory has grown, such that many studies on boundary objects now pay close attention to abstract and non-material concepts (Bartel and Garud, 2003; Boland Jr. and Tenkasi, 1995; Chang, Hatcher, and Kim, 2013; Fujimura, 1992; Kim and King, 2000; Koskinen, 2005; Swan et al., 2007; Yakura, 2002).

While the broader ‘boundary objects’ term refers to any material or non-material object, Löwy (1992) introduces the notion of *boundary concepts*, which concentrates on ‘ideal’ boundary objects. Such objects are “loosely defined concepts, which precisely because of their vagueness are adaptable to local sites and may facilitate communication and collaboration” (Löwy, 1992, p. 375). Löwy combines the notion of ‘trading zones’ (see also Galison, 1997, 1999) with the concept of boundary objects to develop the notion of boundary concepts. Trading zones “allow local coordination of activities of members of distinct scientific subcultures who continue to disagree on global meanings of terms” (Löwy, 1992, p. 374). While trading zones privilege the relationship between different cultures and the development of new knowledge, Star and Griesemer’s (1989) work on boundary objects centers on devices that facilitate contacts among social worlds. Therefore, although trading zones and boundary objects are rooted in different intellectual traditions, they may be seen as complementary (Löwy, 1992). Löwy views boundary concepts as a tool for furthering the development of trading zones with a focus on the interactions of professional groups (Löwy, 1992).

The notion of boundary concepts is valuable in terms of centering on the abstract and non-material characteristics of a diverse workforce in certain contexts. By using the idea of boundary concepts, we can investigate how the concept of ‘a diverse workforce’ is recurrently constructed as a flexible term, and we can describe how this creates a ‘zone of collaboration’ despite a lack of consensus among professional groups. The emphasis on zones of collaboration help address

the criticism of some boundary object studies for downplaying the complexity of interaction between different groups around an emerging boundary object “in favor of a simplified model wherein a certain object performs the almost miraculous task of coordinating diverse interests and perspectives by virtue of an ‘interpretive flexibility’ that the researcher ascribes to it” (Lainer-Vos, 2013, p. 516; see also Trompette and Vinck, 2009; Zeiss and Groenewegen, 2009). Star seeks to clarify the concept, arguing that “much of the use of the concept has concentrated on the aspect of interpretive flexibility and has often mistaken or conflated this flexibility with the process of tacking back-and-forth between the ill-structured and well-structured aspects of the arrangements” (2010, p. 610). Lainer-Vos (2013) argues that part of the problem resides in researchers, as in the case of Carlile (2002), who treats boundary objects as a *cause* of successful mediation between groups. Following how the concept of a ‘diverse workforce’ arose across domains as a distributed entity, we show how it did not work as a cause but rather as an effect and emerging infrastructural resource enabling us to expand and nuance the often-debated well/ill-structure dichotomy.

In this paper, conceptualizing ‘a diverse workforce’ as a boundary concept means focusing on the beliefs shared among cooperating communities. We present an empirical setting in which practitioners in a corporate global HRM department construct a diverse workforce as part of their daily work. In this case, ‘a diverse workforce’ is not a predetermined concept that encapsulates certain characteristics, such as demographic projections (Choudhury, 1996), but rather a common representation that allows for different local understandings that are not necessarily shared among communities. This approach enables us to understand how and with what effects the concept of ‘a diverse workforce’ is constructed and enacted within this organizational setting. It points to the mediating role that the concept hold by acting as an enabler of shared beliefs among actors despite a lack of consensus regarding its meaning.

### ***Studying change in representations of ‘a diverse workforce’***

In the study of organizations, boundary objects are often envisioned as spanning the spatial dimension. In other words, studies have addressed the organizational effects of these objects across certain spaces, such as functional and geographical communities (Briers and Chua, 2001; Carlile, 2002; Hong and Snell, 2013; Levina, 2005; Sapsed and Salter, 2004). Therefore, the spatial properties of these objects and concepts have been widely studied, while temporal properties have received significantly less attention (M’charek, 2014). Lainer-Vos (2013) and Zeiss and Groenewegen (2009) argue that it is necessary to pay more attention to how boundary

objects *evolve* in order to advance the body of knowledge within this field. In many cases, the temporality of boundary objects has been acknowledged, but it is seldom depicted except in retrospective or historical accounts (Lainer-Vos, 2013; M'charek, 2014). Recent studies (Lainer-Vos, 2013; M'charek, 2014; Oswick and Robertson, 2009; Star, 2010; Zeiss and Groenewegen, 2009) have advocated for a temporal focus in order to recognize the ecological nature of objects as both time and space dependent. Therefore, a pertinent need exists for a temporal account that closely follows the shifting representations of a boundary concept, which we aim to provide in this paper. As M'charek (2014, p. 5) notes: "After the spatial turn the temporal turn is yet to arrive, even if theoretically and conceptually the temporality of objects has been anticipated". As such, we have yet to come across an account of boundary concepts in which the main focus is on processual changes in the boundary concept itself rather than the temporality that these concepts inject into the network. In our study, the central focus on the temporality of the boundary concept enables us to address our central theoretical question: *How can a boundary-concept perspective advance our understanding of 'a diverse workforce'?*

In investigating this research question, we pay particular attention to how a boundary-concept perspective can address the inadvertent gliding between workforce diversity and diversity in general. In this regard, we seek to bring the workforce back into the workforce diversity discussion. As such, we address the "scope and ... need for improving the conceptual tools and empirical explorations in [the workforce diversity] area in order to contextualize diversity management processes in their socioeconomic and organizational settings" (Tatli, 2011, p. 238).

## **Research Setting**

### ***The Diverse and Global Workforce Project***

This paper is based on ethnographic fieldwork conducted by one of the authors between March 2012 and January 2013 in the global HRM branch of PharmaTech (a pseudonym) – a large Scandinavian biopharmaceutical company. PharmaTech has more than 43,000 employees working in 76 countries. The organization is highly successful and forecasts a significant expansion of its workforce in the coming decade, especially outside Scandinavia. The author gained access to the organization as part of a three-year research program during which he was employed by the company.

To position the company for future growth, and to predict and manage the demands of a diverse workforce, the organization launched an initiative entitled the Diverse and Global Workforce (DGW) Project. As the name indicates, the project reflected management's anticipation of a fundamental change in the composition of PharmaTech's workforce as the company became more diverse and global. The aim of the Diverse and Global Workforce Project was to re-conceptualize the corporate approach to the workforce and, more specifically, the HRM division's approach to the workforce given likely diversity challenges. At the time of the project's initiation, the HRM division comprised approximately 300 employees working in a number of sub-departments. The DGW project sought to understand how departments within this corporate division approached the workforce and whether there was room for improvements in this area. Unlike many of PharmaTech's HRM projects, this project did not seek to enhance HRM services, but to reflect on the premises on which HRM services were constructed in relation to the company's workforce.

The company's global HRM division initially planned to fund the project. However, the division's management applied for executive management funding in order to gain access to more monetary resources and raise awareness of the project. At the same time, a top-level consultancy report concluded that the company should engage senior management in more innovation activities. Based on that report, the project was selected by executive management to receive funding. The project thus had resources beyond those typical for HRM projects within the organization. However, those resources meant that those working on the project had to report directly to top management.

The Diverse and Global Workforce Project was driven by a group of employees along with a secondary tranche of internal and external consultants recruited on an ad hoc basis. Beyond the primary team, the project involved a network of more than 100 people at different points in time and in different ways. This network included trend forecasters and segmentation analysts from elite academic and consulting institutions, such as the London Business School and PriceWaterhouseCoopers. The project's two primary team members, Leia and Trevor (Team Members 1 and 2), were situated three hierarchical layers below the CEO and reported directly to the closest Vice President. In the ten months that the project ran, the team interacted with a few of the global HRM division's sub-departments, divisional managers, top management, and several other departments within the organization.

This project was highly appropriate for addressing the research questions, as it offered an opportunity to gain an emic understanding of an unfolding, multi-departmental project focused on a diverse workforce in real time through ethnographic study. Furthermore, although the concept of the workforce was used in everyday parlance and was, therefore, assumed to exist as an organizational fact, different understandings of the concept existed across the various departments/stakeholders, as shown in Table 2. The table portrays the differences in work practices and representations of ‘the workforce’ among unions and sub-departments within the global HRM division. The workforce was not only diverse in the sense that it encompassed thousands of people with different characteristics, but also in these sense that multiple and diverging conceptualizations of it existed. Moreover, the workforce not only takes the form of an abstract, locally tailored list of included/excluded employees, but it also constitutes a central element in many different practices within the global HRM division Table 2 highlights the potential of the boundary concept as an analytical frame for this study. More specifically, it demonstrates how groups in different organizational settings translated the concept of the workforce.

**Table 2: The Workforce as Boundary Concept**

Departments	Work practices and representations
People Reporting and Analytics	The workforce is represented via a set of data inputs that render it a statistical object. This enables forecasting, strategic (workforce) planning and competition for budget/resource allocations among departments.
Diversity and Inclusion	This division draws from data provided by People Reporting and Analytics to monitor workforce composition, especially in terms of gender and cultural background. The workforce is conceived as something in need of monitoring and ‘fixing’.
Rewards and Benefits	The workforce is defined as all contractually employed full-time workers (excluding ‘marginal’ employees not involved in rewards and benefits programs, such as students, interns, external consultants and part-time workers). This division draws from data provided by People Reporting and Analytics to plan and distribute yearly bonuses to top-performing staff, and to identify functional/geographical areas in the organization deserving of extraordinary economic incentives to support growth.

Talent Attraction

This division focuses on the ‘not-yet-hired’ talents, and centers on inputs from social media and external job platforms.

Unions and union representatives

The workforce is defined as encompassing all contractually employed workers (excluding the ‘not-yet-hired’ talents).

## Research Design and Method

We conducted our study of the Diverse and Global Workforce Project with an open-ended empirical research question: How was ‘a diverse workforce’ constructed and enacted in this organization? Our study adopted an emic perspective on fieldwork (Tatli and Özbilgin, 2012b) – an approach that mimics the methodological approaches found in the extant boundary-object research, in which the “explanatory power” of a boundary-object methodology is “an effect of careful description of chains of translations (Callon, 1986) *without* relying on a priori categories” (Lainer-Vos, 2013, p. 519). The goal was to provide a thick description and explanation of the unfolding content and outcomes of the processes that the project team undertook to conceptualize the workforce. A key assumption underpinning the project was that the organization needed to be customized ‘to fit the employee’. This implied that the project needed to identify and accommodate differences among employees. In the early stages of the ethnographic study, the author collecting the data was encouraged by the project team to read *Workforce of One* by Cantrell and Smith (2010). The team was greatly inspired by this book, which discusses the need to rework organizational classification systems so as to treat each employee as a ‘workforce of one’ and to cater for “unique needs, aspirations and preferences” (Cantrell and Smith, 2010, p. 1).

The researcher used participant-observational techniques, conducted formal and informal interviews, and collected documentary materials as part of his fieldwork. During the 10-month data-collection period, he partook in and observed weekly meetings, and audio-recorded the majority of those meetings (generating approximately 150 hours of recorded meetings). Besides undertaking numerous informal interviews he also conducted 10 formal interviews – both unstructured and semi-structured. Lastly, in order to pursue an ethical research standard the researcher’s identity and interests were declared to all participants.

The researcher not only attended scheduled meetings and interviews, but also followed his intuition in searching for new sources of information, tracking interesting occurrences, rephrasing questions and enjoying serendipitous conversations about unexpected issues, as

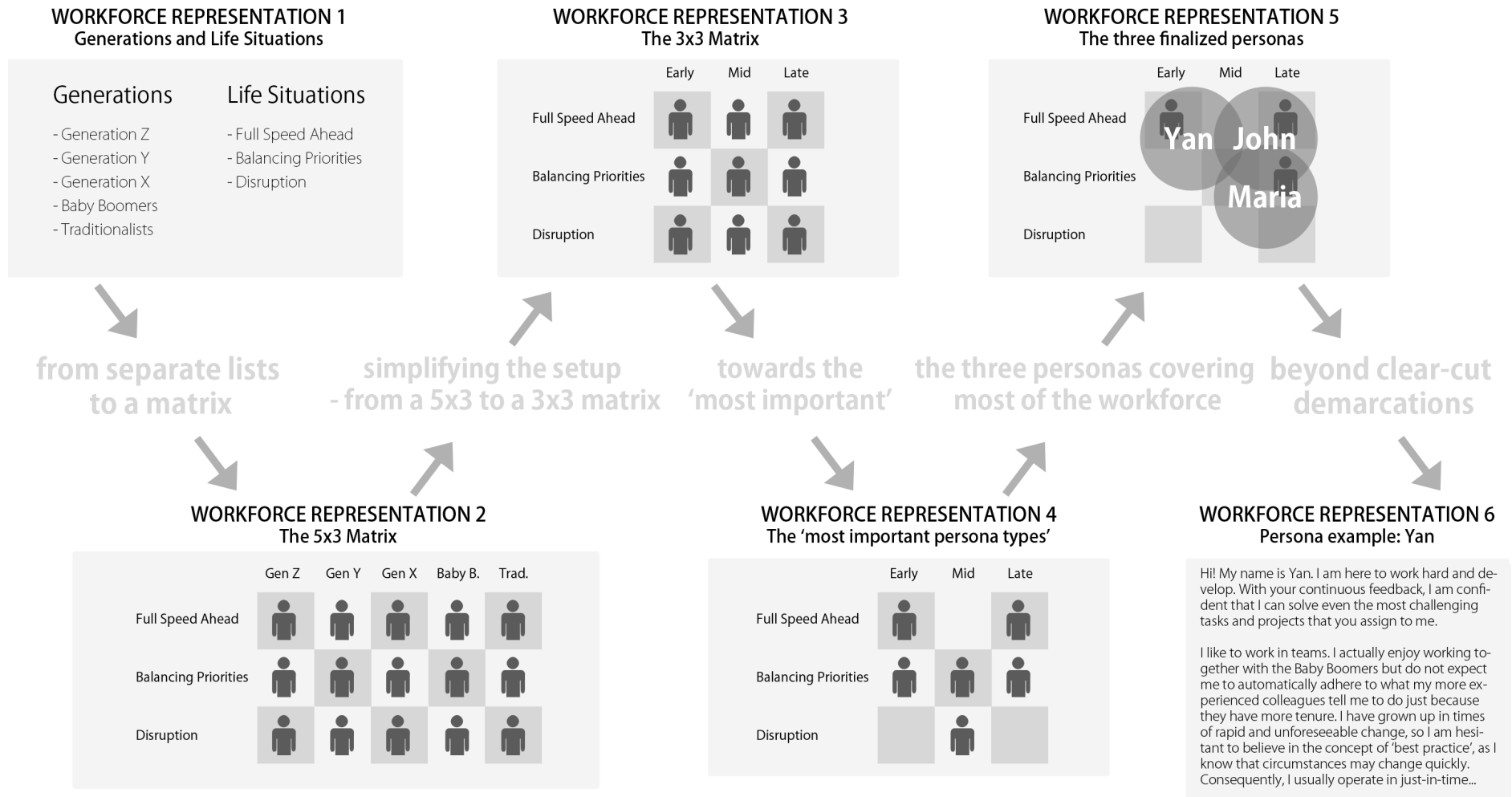


recommended by Czarniawska (2008a) in her discussion of field work. Data collection, sense-making and analysis were iterative processes that occurred concurrently throughout the empirical study rather than in discrete temporal stages (Alvesson and Kärreman, 2011). Emergent theoretical hunches and intuitive sense-making led to the probing and testing of the constituent categories in subsequent data collection, which then refined, extended or negated the emergent hunch. The writing up of the analysis for this paper necessarily involved a retrospective re-writing of the ethnographic experience into a particular time sequence, which Czarniawska (2004) refers to as ‘kairotic time’. In other words, the summations of relevant actions, which we call ‘workforce representation’ phases, serve as episodes around which the argument is constructed. Therefore, rather than following a strict and consistent linear narrative in relation to time, the paper “jumps and slows down, omits long periods and dwells on others” (Czarniawska, 2004, p. 775).

## **Analysis**

When analyzing the material, we divided the storyline into six phases referred to as ‘Workforce representation 1-6’. Each phase describes a distinct representation of the workforce (see Figure 1) following a ‘temporal bracketing strategy’ (Langley, 1999). The six phases are consecutive, meaning that each representation preceded the next in real time. The phases culminated in the final representation of the workforce as narratives (representation 6). Figure 1 provides a visual overview of the key findings and shows how clearly demarcated categories representing the workforce went through a process of simplification over time, only to be ultimately re-represented as one-page persona narratives. The following sections present a detailed account of *how* the transformation from employee categories to personas occurred.

**Figure 1: Visualizing the Research Findings: Unfolding the Phases of Workforce Representation**



## ***Workforce representation 1: Generations and Life Situations***

In the process leading up to workforce representation 1, the team went from a state of confusion regarding the meaning of ‘re-approaching an increasingly diverse workforce’ to suggesting a set of clearly demarcated employee categories. By outlining these clearly demarcated categories, ‘a diverse workforce’ was then represented as two separate sets of categories: *Generations* and *Life Situations* (see ‘Workforce representation 1’ in Figure 1). Generations encompassed five employee categories – *Traditionalists*, *Baby Boomers*, *Generation X*, *Generation Y* and *Generation Z* – each representing people born at certain periods of time (e.g., between 1961 and 1981). Life Situations consisted of three employee categories: *Full Speed Ahead*, *Balancing Priorities* and *Disruption*. *Full Speed Ahead* refers to a situation in which the employee is ‘running full speed’ at work. *Balancing Priorities* describes a situation in which the employee decides to focus on aspects of life other than work, such as raising children. *Disruption* describes a situation in which the employee is forced to focus on other aspects of life than work, such as when family members fall ill and require care. Table 3 demonstrates that the team listed Generations and Life Situations as clearly distinct from each other with no apparent overlaps.

**Table 3: Generations and Life Situations**

<b>Generations</b>	<b>Life Situations</b>
Traditionalists	Full-Speed-Ahead
Baby Boomers	Balancing Priorities
Generation X	Disruption
Generation Y	
Generation Z	

Of the many facets that characterize a workforce, Generations and Life Situations indicated that the team was focusing on age distribution (through Generations) and employee motivations (Life Situations). These two sets of categories were globally applicable and were meant to inspire HRM departments to be aware of likely changes to the workforce as the company grew. The team held several workshops in which they presented these two sets of categories as a way for the HRM departments to view their work in a new light. Participants were asked to relate

Generations and Life Situations to their daily work, and to consider whether their departments could accommodate this novel representation of the workforce. In the following sections, we show how the team transformed the representation of the workforce from the clear demarcations inherent in Generations and Life Situations into one-page narratives of employee prototypes, which are referred to as personas.

***Workforce representation 2: The 5x3 matrix***

In August 2012, the team met with an internal consultant to debate possible ways of advancing the Diverse and Global Workforce Project. In particular, they discussed how to produce a representation of the workforce that various HRM departments would find useful. Generations and Life Situations had proven to be problematic. While the closest senior vice president wanted the team to focus on the growing age disparity within the workforce, others preferred that the team focus on life situations. Some even expressed their dissatisfaction with the focus on generations and advocated for a more ‘flexible’ set of categories. The team was therefore searching for another way to represent the workforce. As the categories were adapted over time to accommodate different interests, they had come to represent opposing viewpoints. Given that the team sought consensus among its participants, these opposing viewpoints were unproductive. To avoid further encouragement of opposing viewpoints, the team wanted to re-represent Generations and Life Situations as intersecting and mutually dependent. Therefore, instead of listing Generations and Life Situations as two separate, disjunctive sets of categories (as in Table 3), the team placed the categories in a matrix aimed at showing that Generations and Life Situations should be viewed in combination (see Table 4 and ‘Workforce representation 2’ in Figure 1).

**Table 4: The 5x3 Matrix**

	<b>Generation Z</b>	<b>Generation Y</b>	<b>Generation X</b>	<b>Baby Boomers</b>	<b>Traditionalists</b>
<b>Full Speed Ahead</b>	Employee 1	Employee 2	Employee 3	Employee 4	Employee 5
<b>Balancing Priorities</b>	Employee 6	Employee 7	Employee 8	Employee 9	Employee 10
<b>Disruption</b>	Employee 11	Employee 12	Employee 13	Employee 14	Employee 15

As the team moved Generations and Life Situations into the matrix, they quickly came to the conclusion that the new matrix created too many intersections (fifteen in total). This

complex setup did not fit well in a setting in which the new workforce representation had to be easy to understand. In the quote below, an internal consultant reflects on the new matrix setup:

If we want to focus on one person, saying “He is driven by this. He is this generation and in this life situation”, then we have a lot of different segments... By making these people mutually exclusive, we have [eight] different kinds. However, if we start adding up, we... have a lot of segments, which means the tool is no longer as useful.

The consultant argues that too many segments make this type of representation useless. The team was therefore caught between wanting to suggest a new, simple representation of the workforce and the need to be comprehensive and appropriate for the different settings and actors involved.

### ***Workforce representation 3: The 3x3 matrix***

Given the complexity of the 5x3 matrix, the team began to debate how to simplify the setup to reduce the number of combinations. Eventually, the fifteen employee prototypes shown in Table 4 were reduced to the nine employee prototypes shown in Table 5 (see also ‘Workforce representation 3’ in Figure 1). The five Generations categories were replaced with three Career Stages categories: Early, Mid and Late Career (see Table 5).

**Trevor, Team Member 2:** If I am to [choose one of the fifteen employee prototypes]... we have young people who basically want to move ahead [referring to ‘employee prototype 1’ in the 5x3 matrix]. We then need to focus on this [intersection between Generation Z and Full Speed Ahead] and construct the persona profile based on the topics we choose...

**Leia, Team Member 1:** We had a session with [an external consultancy company] in which they used Early, Mid and Late Career. In that session, we removed Generations, because ... having five Generations makes them too narrow – they do not differentiate enough.

**Trevor, Team Member 2:** I am a fan of that suggestion. With Early, Mid and Late Career and Full Speed Ahead, Balancing Priorities and Disrupt... we simplify the setup. Then we end up with fewer personas, which is wonderful.

**Table 5: The 3x3 Matrix**

	<b>Early Career</b>	<b>Mid Career</b>	<b>Late Career</b>
<b>Full Speed Ahead</b>	Employee 1	Employee 2	Employee 3
<b>Balancing Priorities</b>	Employee 4	Employee 5	Employee 6
<b>Disruption</b>	Employee 7	Employee 8	Employee 9

While the two sets of categories, Generations and Life Situations, had previously been presented as one of the project’s major outcomes, the focus was now turning towards matrices and their intersections. However, team members continued to debate whether they should pursue other representations of the workforce. The initial criticism of Generations and Life Situations was that they did not embrace the different and sometimes conflicting interests of some actors. However, no easy solution seemed possible, as the demarcations tested thus far all conflicted with certain interests or work practices. The question was therefore the following: Was it possible to find that one categorization system that did not conflict with anyone’s opinion or interests? The team eventually decided to depart from clearly demarcated categorizations and to instead represent the workforce through persona narratives. Nevertheless, as the team did not wish to simply disregard the effort put into developing a categorization system, it came up with a compromise of ‘extracting’ the most relevant personas from the matrix.

### ***Workforce representation 4: The ‘most important’ employee prototypes***

When extracting the most important personas from the matrix, the team excluded the ‘less important’ employee prototypes in order to arrive at a simpler setup. Initially, the idea was to look at the intersection between two dimensions in the matrix and then tease out the most important characteristics from that employee prototype in order to write up a fictional employee persona narrative:

**Trevor, Team Member 2:** I am thinking that the [3x3 matrix] should be used to pick specific combinations... so that we appeal to as many employees as possible... when we discuss the results with others... by having personas representing this situation, that situation and a third situation. Then we need to reflect on what the narrative should be.

**Leia, Team Member 1:** If you look at Early, Mid and Late Career Stages, map those according to the Life Situations, and then finalize one combination, you ask, ‘What are the central points in this box?’. You then convert those central points into a persona.

Although the initial idea was to construct each persona based on one employee prototype (i.e., one intersection between two dimensions in the matrix), the team eventually decided to construct personas that represented more than one employee prototype. The personas were constructed to cover a broad range of characteristics, such that a few short narratives could embrace the entire workforce.

**Trevor, Team member 2:** So, one persona has to cover several fields in the matrix. Please correct me if I am wrong.

**Leia, Team member 1:** Yes that is right, but if we have Full Speed Ahead, Balancing Priorities and Disruption, as well as the other dimensions, then it is difficult to include them all.

**Trevor, Team member 2:** I agree. It sounds great, but is it difficult in practice.

**Leia, Team member 1:** True. In theory, it sounds great, but it does not work in practice.

**Trevor, Team member 2:** It is very complicated... What should the personas do in practice?

**Leia, Team member 1:** The personas should... describe our workforce.

The transformation from the well-structured and explicit demarcations (i.e., Generations and Life Situations) to persona narratives aimed to overcome the conflict provoked by the two sets of categories. Moreover, the transformation of Generations into Career Stages was merely a stepping-stone in the move towards representing the workforce as personas. Even though the team had reduced the number of categories that served as the basis for the personas (by moving from five Generations to three Career Stages), the number of personas actually written was even lower.

In the quote below, Leia explains that employees should ‘recognize themselves in more than one persona’. By reducing the number of employee prototypes from nine to six, the team wished to provide an ‘easy and operational’ representation of the workforce. This is an important transformation, as the team departs from the well-structured, clearly demarcated

arrangement of the matrix, and instead lets multiple prototypes serve as the basis for constructing the persona narrative.

**Leia, Team Member 1:** We have tried to construct the [employee prototypes] so that employees do not necessarily recognize themselves in only one of the personas – elements from all of the personas should cover their specific needs. That is the theory. We can cut out one third of [the employee prototypes] because it gets too complicated if employees have to read all nine [persona narratives]. Therefore, as Trevor (Team Member 2) said, we want to make it easy and operational. The six should cover all of the types.

The six ‘most important’ prototypes are shown in Table 6 (see also ‘Workforce representation 4’ in Figure 1).

**Table 6: Plotting Principal Employee Prototypes**

	Early	Mid	Late
<b>Full Speed Ahead</b>	Employee 1		Employee 3
<b>Balancing Priorities</b>	Employee 4	Employee 5	Employee 6
<b>Disruption</b>		Employee 8	

Of the three ‘less important’ prototypes removed from the matrix, two were in the Disruption category. This reflects the fact that the team deemed the Disruption situation less relevant than the other Life Situations. At meetings, ‘Disruption’ was viewed as representing a less desirable future that was far from the ‘success and growth’ discourse often invoked within the company. The removal of the Full Speed Ahead Mid Career prototype was somewhat surprising, as this was one of the major segments within the workforce. However, the decision reflects how local management and, in particular, the senior vice president assessing the project were interested in a focus on the ‘able, late-career employee’. Moreover, removal of the Full Speed Ahead Early Career prototype did not seem to be a good option, as it contradicted the agenda of attracting young, high-performing talents.



### ***Workforce representation 5: The three finalized personas***

The fifth phase highlights the final three employee prototypes that served as the basis for the one-page persona narratives. The reduction of the ideal employee types to these three personas reflected the company’s focus on late-career employees and young top performers (see Table 7). Three personas – named Yan, Maria and John – were meant to represent the total workforce population and, therefore, to integrate elements of other employee prototypes (illustrated by circles overlapping more than one employee prototypes). Although the team viewed these three ideal types as ‘most important’, they were presented in a way that enabled them to embody other ‘less important’ employee prototypes. Thus, one persona represented multiple employee prototypes, as illustrated in Table 7 (see also ‘Workforce representation 5’ in Figure 1).

**Table 7: Translation of Employee Prototypes into Three Narrative Personas**

	<b>Early</b>	<b>Mid</b>	<b>Late</b>
<b>Full Speed Ahead</b>	Yan		John
<b>Balancing Priorities</b>			
<b>Disruption</b>			Maria

### ***Workforce representation 6: Persona example ‘Yan’***

Trevor (Team Member 2) was asked to write up an initial draft of the persona narratives based the attributes extracted from the employee prototypes, albeit with an emphasis on the three most important prototypes (see Table 7). The narratives were debated and rewritten until the team reached consensus. Textbox 1 presents one outcome of this process – the story of Yan: An Early Career, Full Speed Ahead type of employee. At meetings, Yan’s story was presented on a PowerPoint slide and one team member read it aloud. After reading the story, the attendees discussed the persona in plenum. Even though the two other persona narratives were also written, Yan was the only one presented at meetings.

**Textbox 1: Narrative Persona Example: Yan (Early Career Stage, Full Speed Ahead)**

Hi! My name is Yan. I am here to work hard and develop. With your continuous feedback, I am confident that I can solve even the most challenging tasks and projects that you assign to me.

I like to work in teams. I actually enjoy working together with the Baby Boomers but do not expect me to automatically adhere to what my more experienced colleagues tell me to do just because they have more tenure. I have grown up in times of rapid and unforeseeable change, so I am hesitant to believe in the concept of ‘best practice’, as I know that circumstances may change quickly. Consequently, I usually operate in just-in-time mode and I make decisions according to the input that I constantly receive from many different sources.

I usually say, “Give me a problem and the right tools, and I will figure it out”. However, I would like to have someone who can coach me when I need it. I may forget things, but that does not matter too much, as I keep my memory in Google.

Career progression means a lot to me and I am very interested in receiving constant feedback on my performance. When it comes to rewarding me for my performance, I may prefer a career-development opportunity to a monetary reward. When it comes to my remuneration, I would like to be empowered to the greatest extent possible in order to make my own choices with regards to my pension, etc. In general, recognition means a lot to me as well as the people in my extensive network both inside and outside [the company]. If I feel that I am not progressing, I am very likely to search for other exciting opportunities. I consider a quick job change a reasonable action to take in order to ensure career development.

My job is a key priority in my life, and I do not appreciate any form of rigidity with regard to time, space, job or career. I expect to be able to connect from anywhere, anytime, so that I can basically be in more than one place at the same time. Likewise, I view my job and career development as an iterative and continuous process. I will stay loyal to my employer as long as there is a reason to be loyal. In the face of challenge, I become pragmatic and determine which battles are worth my time. Right now, in times of global financial instability, I am reluctant to quit my job. However, when times get better or if I see a great opportunity and I am not satisfied in my current role, I will not hesitate to take action.

***The end result: Hiding demarcations***

Conveniently, the personas departed from the closely drawn boundaries set by Generations, Life Situations and Career Stages. Personas, which took the form of one-page narratives, contained a great deal of information ready to be filtered out and interpreted by the audience. As Trevor argues below, the development of the personas was an attempt to depart from the idea of

putting people into “boxes” or categories. The transformation into personas is noteworthy, as the categorical boundaries of Generations, Career Stages and Life Situations were blurred and eventually deconstructed in order to make personas more inclusive.

**Trevor, Team member 2:** Even though the personas are an attempt to put people in boxes, they also embrace an underlying realization that putting people in boxes is not sufficient.

**HRM department Employee:** That is true!

**Trevor, Team member 2:** However, they are also meant to spawn some discussion.

**HRM department Employee:** I think [the persona model] could seed the ground for some really good discussions... if you, for example, say "Do you know this type?".

In representing the workforce as one-page narratives instead of as a set of categories, the employee prototypes became less structured. Although the personas were based on Career Stages and Life Situations, they implicitly introduced a long list of other attributes that provided much more information than the well-structured demarcations. Consider the first two paragraphs of the Yan persona narrative. The text reveals information about *gender*, *confidence level*, *feedback preferences*, *views on autonomy*, *teamwork preferences*, *decision-making approaches* and *assumptions about best practice*. A matrix based on these elements would have nine dimensions. Thus, the move towards constructing personas that spanned and blurred several previously demarcated categories can be viewed as a way for the team to balance a number of concerns, and to allow for collaboration by hiding the earlier categorical structure and offering thick narrative descriptions of the prototypes.

In the following quote, Luke, a department manager in charge of some of the employees involved in the Diverse and Global Workforce Project, points to the difficulties of ‘getting people involved’. In his view, the personas can help make the connection between an ‘abstract’ idea and ‘what it means for our processes’. Leia and Luke believe personas help the HRM departments make ‘interpretations’ and that they should therefore be easier for HRM departments to use in their everyday work.

**Luke, Department Manager:** The question is how to make the [HRM departments], which we believe should use our project’s findings, get involved... How do we bring them along on this journey and make them understand how this can be used? That's the tricky part.

**Leia, Team Member 1:** As long as we were talking Generations and Life Situations, people tended to go along. However, it became abstract when we asked them: What does this mean for your HRM processes? Then it “died” and the workshops became difficult.

**Luke, Department Manager:** That is right. It seemed difficult to link them to local HRM processes.

**Leia, Team Member 1:** They could easily relate to the Generations and Life Situations, and they recognized them. However, interpreting them in relation to what they meant for their processes...

**Luke, Department Manager:** I think personas can help make that connection.

This discussion indicates that when Generations and Life Situations were related to specific work practices, they became problematic, as each HRM department needed tailored representations of the workforce that depended on their local work practices. Clear but abstract demarcations representing the workforce did not constitute a problem, but the demarcations were contested whenever they had to be interpreted in the everyday work practices of the HRM departments. Thus, even though people accepted the demarcations of ‘the workforce’ on an abstract level, they disagreed when that abstraction was associated with local work practices.

In a meeting preceding a period of persona presentations, the team was asked why they constructed the persona narrative to replace the clear demarcations. As Trevor states, the team members wanted to appeal to the ‘interpretive horizon’ of the audience.

**Trevor, Team Member 2:** We address [the audience’s] interpretive horizon. Some might call it manipulation, while others might call it strategic dissemination. This is basically what we are circling around. I mean... you see these great divides. However, if you construct a narrative, we might better see each other together and use it collaboratively. Some filter some things out and others include new elements in the story.

The team capitulates in the difficult feat of constructing a clearly demarcated yet locally comprehensive segmentation of the workforce. Instead the team decides to re-represents the workforce using less well-structured persona narratives, thereby enabling multiple and diverging understandings of the workforce. As Manager 1 points out, the personas are aimed at making the relevant employees get involved. This is necessary if the project is to gain any relevance among HRM departments and management.

The persona narratives were introduced in the final phase (the last two months) of the Diverse and Global Workforce Project. At the end of the project, five concluding meetings were held at which the narratives were presented. The narratives did not give rise to any apparent conflict among different HRM departments and management. Ultimately, however, the narratives were never integrated into the work of the local HRM departments.

In an interview conducted after completion of the Diverse and Global Workforce Project, Leia points to a central lesson of the project learned. As Leia notes, the project aimed to develop a new approach to workforce classification, but it did so with little respect for the actual day-to-day work practices in the HRM departments:

**Leia, Team Member 1:** One of the very early lessons was that we cannot take someone outside a [specific HRM department] and make them develop new methods for [that department] without the department itself being involved... A central aspect of [the Diverse and Global Workforce Project] was to identify new innovative methods. When a solution was found, it was to be transferred to the HRM departments. However, that form of development is very difficult – it is hard to have ownership of the solution if you do not agree on the problem.

## Discussion

This study highlights a process in which the representation of the workforce progressively changes from a well-structured representation (i.e., separate lists, matrices and clearly demarcated categories) to a flexible representation in which the previous employee-category structure is folded into “thick descriptions” of prototypes (i.e., persona narratives). It portrays a process of translation during which multiple interests are negotiated and mediated, and the idea of ‘a diverse workforce’ is transformed. The empirical story can then be seen as a case with several steps (shown in Figure 1). First, ‘a diverse workforce’ is demarcated into two sets of employee categories: Generations and Life Situations. Second, these two sets of categories are aligned in a matrix showing the intersections between them, and each intersection is referred to as a prototype. Third, the number of employee prototypes is reduced. Fourth, the ‘most important’ employee prototypes are selected. Fifth, the three ‘most important’ employee prototypes are constructed so that they encompass characteristics from the ‘less important’

prototypes. Finally, the prototypes representing ‘a diverse workforce’ are changed into persona narratives.

The study thus shows an attempt to enable multiple interpretations of ‘the workforce’ by hiding demarcations and providing “thick description” characterizations. Through the six phases, the representation of the workforce gradually transforms. The one-page persona narratives (Workforce representation 6) hold more information than the earlier clear-cut demarcations (Workforce representations 1-5). This rich articulation allows for more interpretive flexibility, while the underlying structure moves into the background. According to the team, such narratives enable the audience to filter out those aspects that they deem relevant. The process of gradually reducing the number of employee prototypes and eventually re-representing the workforce as persona narratives reflects the mediating role of ‘a diverse workforce’ as a loosely defined boundary concept. According to the team, the persona narratives appeal to the audience’s interpretive horizon, thereby enabling multiple local understandings of what constitutes ‘a diverse workforce’. Moreover, the departure from clear-cut demarcations highlights the challenge of constructing a demarcated representation of ‘a diverse workforce’ that would appeal to the various HRM departments and management.

The re-representation of the workforce in persona narratives can be seen as an attempt to avoid conflicts by blurring boundaries and increasing the interpretative flexibility of the workforce concept. As we have mentioned, the persona narratives introduced in the final phase of the Diverse and Global Workforce Project did not create any apparent conflict among management and different sub-departments within the global HRM division. However, the narratives were never actually integrated into the work of the local sub-departments. The implementation of the narratives into local work practices would most likely cause problems, as they offered a loose-structured common representation in contrast to the well-structured representations used locally. This mimics one of the central characteristics of boundary concepts: the common representation that these concepts constitute is not necessarily useful on the local level. From a boundary-concept perspective, the well-structured, clear-cut demarcations of ‘a diverse workforce’ were problematic because they could never be fully integrated into all of the different work practices found in the different HRM departments. More precisely, a loosely defined, flexible workforce representation mediates and enables collaboration *across* communities because of its flexible character.

The HRM departments within PharmaTech each work with different local representations of ‘the workforce’ in their everyday work. Only during the Diverse and Global Workforce

Project did these different departments attempt to agree on a shared representation. Conflicts and disagreements arose when the team suggested a demarcated representation of the workforce, even though such demarcations existed locally. Notably, however, a flexible representation of the workforce enabled working relationships between the different departments. These insights into the social construction, organizational dynamics and effects of ‘a diverse workforce’, conceptualized as a boundary concept, are similar to the ways in which other scholars frame concepts, such as cancer (Fujimura, 1992), care pathways (Allen, 2009) and immunology (Löwy, 1992) (see, e.g., Yakura, 2002; Chang et al., 2013; Bartel and Garud, 2003; Boland and Tenkasi, 1995; Kim and King, 2000; Koskinen, 2005; Swan et al., 2007). However, while some characteristics are shared among these concepts, they are found in different settings. Therefore, recognition of the boundary-concept characteristics of ‘a diverse workforce’ holds the promise of providing a new theoretical perspective that can disrupt conventional thinking within workforce diversity research.

The principal theoretical question underpinning this paper was ‘How can a boundary-concept perspective advance our understanding of ‘a diverse workforce’?. In response to this question, we highlight two points: 1) how our study can inform current theoretical understandings within the workforce diversity literature; and 2) how our study can support practitioners, especially those involved in the daily management of the workforce, such as high-level management and corporate HRM practitioners.

### ***Theoretical implications***

Research into workforce diversity mainly focuses on what diversity entails, whether diversity in the workforce contributes to organizational prosperity, and how marginalized and/or oppressed groups within the workforce gain influence. Many of these studies either provide support for or alternatives to the earliest demographic projections presented in the Workforce 2000 report. While the spectrum of debated ‘dimensions of diversity’ has expanded, there is still a historical heritage to this way of viewing workforce diversity.

Although these debates can be said to point to different representations of the workforce, we hope to inspire scholars to see the relevance of a different representational perspective. We have shown how ‘a diverse workforce’ is not a predetermined notion (Tatli and Özbilgin, 2012b) but a boundary concept comprised of loosely structured and loosely defined characteristics across communities, as well as well-structured and locally tailored characteristics within organizational communities. Moreover, our findings nuance popular notions of well or

loosely structured (Star, 2010) by pointing to how the shift from well-structure to loosely structured representations occurs. In particular, we show how the end result – a flexible representation of the workforce – can hold traces of well-structured representations, which practitioners are able to hide using thick descriptions. This demonstrates that representations can exist as a balance between well-structured and loosely structured conceptualizations.

We believe that the workplace diversity literature could benefit from a debate on the construction of workforce representations that acknowledges each construction's empirical situation and temporal characteristics, as well as the ability to tap into different forms of structured and unstructured categorizations. This has implications for our understanding of the 'workforce diversity' phenomenon. Contrary to mainstream debates focusing on how 'a diverse workforce' consists of diversity dimensions of the workforce, we show that the idea (or concept) of 'a diverse workforce' can be used as a tool to create coherence in organizations despite a lack of consensus among actors.

While much workforce diversity research has paid attention to *which* diversity dimensions are represented, less attention has been paid to the multifaceted and shifting nature of a diverse workforce in its dynamic representations. In practice, this has meant that when researchers have focused on *how* a diverse workforce is represented, they have often done so in order to explain *which* type of individual or social differences are salient and why. Moreover, much of the workforce diversity research has departed from historically salient and etic-derived demarcations, such as gender, class and race (Tatli and Özbilgin, 2012b). This paper has adopted a different representational perspective investigating how 'a diverse workforce' is represented via other conceptual tools, such as lists, matrices and narratives. Our aim is not to disregard the substantive and important work done in the field of workforce diversity research thus far. Instead, we seek to draw attention to the way 'a diverse workforce' is co-constructed by both the specific diversity dimensions and the conceptual tools used to represent those dimensions. The use of these tools tells a different but highly relevant story. 'A diverse workforce' is constructed by the way it is situated within a particular context, and it has particular social and organizational effects for those engaging in the work of representation. We must, therefore, pay attention not only to specific diversity dimension but also to the tools used to convey 'a diverse workforce'. We believe that future workforce diversity research could benefit from paying attention to how 'a diverse workforce' is represented *across* communities, and we encourage scholars to consider the boundary-concept characteristics of 'a diverse workforce'.



A boundary-concept perspective invites diversity scholars to pay attention to the premises under which each representation thrives by giving primacy to diverse representations of ‘the workforce’. Future studies could benefit from focusing on the shifting representations of ‘a diverse workforce’ rather than making this a peripheral and implicit issue.

### ***Practical implications***

The empirical story presented in this paper points to a practical problematic: how the nature of the concept of ‘a diverse workforce’ is understood and rendered manageable in PharmaTech. Part of the trouble that the team encountered arose from the assumption that different departments could agree on a clear definition of ‘a diverse workforce’. The team was established to rethink the way in which the workforce was approached, and to confer with various departments and management on this new approach. However, in the end, the project showed that many different approaches thrived locally and that these variations could not be aggregated into a common approach to the globally growing workforce. The team driving the Diverse and Global Workforce Project realized that ‘a diverse workforce’ is not only ‘diverse’ in the sense of the presence of employees with various diversity characteristics, but it is also in the sense of *how* ‘a diverse workforce’ is conceptualized and used among HRM departments.

A richly articulated and loose conceptualization of ‘a diverse workforce’ across communities became part of the glue that tied different HRM departments engaged in the workforce-related work together. This is what Löwy (1992, p. 373) refers to as ‘the strength of loose concepts’. Loose concepts can gather many actors together because actors can recognize themselves in those concepts and translate them according to their needs. However, trying to define and demarcate the nature of this glue (the workforce) risks raising the question of whether these departments actually have a common cause. As such, organizations and corporate HRM managers should seek to strike a balance in future project work that allows for local interpretations and work-related practices pertaining to a diverse workforce to co-exist, rather than implementing a uniform vision with which local managers are expected to conform. Moreover, diversity managers would be wise to pay attention to the content of corporate diversity work (i.e., the question of diversity dimensions and knowable categories of difference) as well as the social processes through which the workforce is brought into being through a variety of visual and verbal representations.

## Conclusion

In this paper, we set out to address conceptual and empirical shortcomings in the existing workplace diversity literature focused on diversity management. These shortcomings arise from the poorly understood status of the ‘workforce’ concept in studies of ‘a diverse workforce’. In our empirical study of the processes and effects of the ongoing conceptualization and translation of this concept within a corporate global diversity project, we focused on a primary theoretical question: *How can a boundary-concept perspective advance our understanding of ‘a diverse workforce’?*

Inspired by the idea of boundary concepts, we have shown how the representation of ‘a diverse workforce’ moved from well-structured and clear-cut demarcations to less structured persona narratives. The case presented here has shown an attempt by organizational members to enable multiple interpretations of ‘the workforce’ by hiding demarcations, thereby enabling a loosely structured and shared common representation. In other words, it highlights the analytical relevance of adopting a ‘boundary-concept’ conceptualization of a diverse workforce. In recognizing ‘a diverse workforce’ as undergoing temporal and shifting representations, we become aware of the context in which the concept resides (Lainer-Vos, 2013; Star and Griesemer, 2010). This allows us to question the workforce as a predetermined concept (Tatli and Özbilgin, 2012b). While we recognize the socio-historical reasons for such notions, we advocate for studies that address the shifting representations of workforce diversity, and we stress that these constructions are not fixed realities that are immune to human intervention and change (Omanovic, 2009).

*(Here ends Article 3. References are listed at the end of the dissertation in Chapter 8)*

## CHAPTER 6: ANALYSIS PART 3

- Article 4 -

### **Managing protean diversity: An empirical analysis of how organizational contextual dynamics derailed and dissolved global workforce diversity**

(Authors: Mikkel Marfelt and Sara Muhr)

#### **Keywords:**

Protean diversity, contextual dynamics, diversity management, HRM practices, power, politics

#### **Abstract**

Recently, global workforce diversity and its management have received criticism for not paying attention to the contextual influence stemming from socially constructed dialectics of power and politics. These contextual dynamics, however, tend to be viewed as external to the organization. In this paper, we follow the call for critically investigating the contexts influencing diversity management by analysing the development of a global Human Resource Management (HRM) project initiated to promote a culturally-diverse workforce. We find that despite good intentions, as well as support from top management, the project dissolves through micro-politics and power dynamics. We contribute to the critical literature on workforce diversity by identifying how organizational contextual dynamics influence the way the concept of workforce diversity is constructed and understood at work. Based on these findings, we develop the concept of protean diversity to better understand how to manage the ever-changing and unstable nature of contemporary workforce diversity.

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## Introduction

Due to increased global mobility and the global expansion of many organizations, most large organizations are in one way or another faced with the task of managing an increasingly diverse and global workforce. Therefore, many of them, especially the larger organizations, engage in diversity management projects that have the purpose of managing and capitalizing on the diverse human resources at their disposal; that is, they strive to optimize the differences to the benefit of organizational goals (Jonsen and Özbilgin, 2014). In parallel with such practical interests, the scholarly fields of both cross-cultural management (CCM) and human resource management (HRM) have been concerned with developing models and frameworks for the management of people with diverse backgrounds and profiles (see for example Ely and Thomas, 2001; Ferdman and Brody, 1996).

This managerialist approach to managing diversity has, however, been criticized by a growing body of literature identifying with what Lorbiecki and Jack (2000) refer to as the critical turn in diversity management. Following such a critical lens, the argument proposes that diversity rests on local categories defined according to their co-dependence with historical, institutional and socio-economic issues (e.g. Tatli and Özbilgin, 2012b). Diversity is therefore socially constructed and per definition dependent on local issues of power, language and politics (Zanoni and Janssen, 2004). Within the critical view, the context within which diversity is studied – and/or attempted to be managed – becomes crucial in enabling understandings of the complex dynamics that diversity is constructed around. In this view, it has been shown how, for example, colonial ideologies (Banerjee and Linstead, 2004; Jack and Westwood, 2009; Rhodes and Westwood, 2007; Muhr and Salem, 2013), national context (Boxenbaum, 2006; Omanovic, 2009), the political environment (Titley and Lentin, 2008; Yuval-Davis, 2011), or gendered and raced occupations (Ashcraft, 2013; Hearn, 1982) influence the construction of the concept of diversity itself.

However, often coming from the political-ideological focus of critical theory or similar (e.g. Fournier and Grey, 2000), such context-sensitive approaches to managing diversity tend to focus on historical, cultural and societal influences (Gotsis and Kortesi, 2014). Although relevant and important, such a strong focus on external influences has left the organizational level largely unexplored (Jonsen et al., 2011). This means that most studies at the organizational level are largely dominated by quantitative studies trying to map the effects of diversity initiatives or similar functionalistic/managerialistic focuses (De Wit et al., 2012; Kalev et al.,

2006; Kochan et al., 2003). Here, one argument dominates: Diversity programmes need top-management support in order to succeed. If such programmes fall to, for example, HRM or a lower-level diversity manager, they get sidetracked (Agars and Kottke, 2005; Tatli and Alasia, 2011; William, 2013).

Our ethnographic, longitudinal study of a diversity project in one organization, however, shows that *despite* top-management support and significant status in the organization, a diversity project can still fail. Based on this, the paper aims to discuss the following question: *How does the organizational context influence the way workforce diversity is constructed, understood and thus implemented and practiced in the organization?* In what follows, we demonstrate how the non-categorical and emergent nature of the diversity concept – recommended by the critical diversity scholars – allows diversity to be influenced and changed (and in this case dissolved) by organizational contextual dynamics. We argue that it is only through understanding the protean nature of the concept of diversity and how easily it can be influenced and steered by organizational power and politics that we can move toward diversity initiatives, which can be both non-categorical and emergent *as well as* enjoy top-management support. We conclude by suggesting that the concept of *protean* diversity can help researchers, as well as managers, better understand and manage contemporary global workforce diversity initiatives.

## **Diversity management**

Managing diversity and the literature on it has long been concerned with how employee differences can be optimized and capitalized on, or at least organized in a way that minimizes conflict and collaboration difficulties (e.g. De Wit et al., 2012; Kalev et al., 2006; Kochan et al., 2003). By promoting the business case for diversity, this particular diversity management view distanced itself from the moral and legal concerns of its predecessors ‘affirmative action’ and ‘equal employment opportunities’, which dominated the late 1960s and early 1970s (Holvino and Kamp, 2009). While a management focus on workforce diversity might give preference to managerial and economic concerns – and as such has gained more attention from businesses than affirmative action and equal employment opportunities – it has been profoundly criticized for overlooking social, cultural and historical manifestations of, for example, marginalization, racism, sexism, discrimination and segregation (e.g. Omanovic, 2009; Tatli and Özbilgin, 2012b). Identified as the critical turn of diversity management (Lorbiecki and Jack, 2000), a now sizable body of literature has set out to expose the often hidden dimensions of power

influencing diversity management practices that work to the detriment of the minority (Ghorashi and Sabelis, 2013). However, in order to resist the subjugating power of diversity, the main objective becomes to ‘unmask ‘hidden’ contexts and ‘invisible’ power relations’ (Ahonen et al., 2014: 270) and question established structures of domination and subordination (Meriläinen et al., 2009). Here, it has been argued that because issues of hierarchy, privilege, equity, discrimination and organizational justice are left alone (Holvino and Kamp, 2009; Oswick and Noon, 2014; Tomlinson and Schwabenland, 2010), a systemic oppression ensues. Consequently, rather than leading to greater equality, diversity management practices (by ignoring the socio-historical embeddedness of diversity) are naïve and at times unethical (Muhr, 2008).

Instead of securing equality or inclusion, many diversity practices seem to reinforce stereotypes and the marginalization of minorities (Ghorashi and Sabelis, 2013). In response, critical researchers are beginning to suggest that we need to ‘rethink ... taken-for-granted analytic categories for representing otherness’ (Ailon, 2008: 900), arguing for methods that transgress categories (Muhr, 2008; Rhodes and Westwood, 2007; Janssens and Zanoni, 2014) and binaries (Ahonen et al., 2014; Frenkel and Stenhav, 2006; Muhr and Rehn, 2015) that most diversity initiatives are built on. Therefore, there is little value in using pre-established categories to measure the outcome of diversity. Rather, starting with an exploration of relations of power that lead to the identification of salient categories may yield surprising strands of difference, even though they may leave the researcher in ‘unchartered territory’ (Tatli and Özbilgin, 2012b: 189). The point of, in Tatli and Özbilgin’s (2012b) words, an ‘emic approach’ to workforce diversity is to view people’s differences as salient and emergent as well as multiple, intersecting and contextual (see also Styhre and Eriksson-Zetterquist, 2008).

### ***Context matters***

Although varying in approach and methodology, a general argument stemming from the above emphasis on a non-categorical or intersectional approach has been that diversity management practices need to be analysed in light of the complexity of shifting and multiple forms of changing situations and contexts within which this practice is performed (Calás et al., 2013; Jonsen et al., 2011; Holvino and Kamp, 2009; Tatli and Özbilgin, 2012b). As Holvino and Kamp (2009) assert:

Context is important. For example, what happens, when the discourse of diversity meets other dominant discourses in specific contexts? In what ways may DM act as a catalyst for

change in different contexts? Very few studies address these questions. (Holvino and Kamp, 2009: 399)

The above quote succinctly reflects the focus of critical diversity studies over the past 10 years, which have been devoted to analysing how broader societal discourses on difference influence diversity work and practice, and how diversity is practiced and understood differently in varying national contexts.

Here, we find Zanoni and Janssen's (2004) study of HRM managers' discourse about diversity, in which they illustrate how stereotypes in societal discourses influence the way diversity management is practiced. Propelled by this article and its call for a discursive approach, it is now common knowledge in critical diversity management studies that dominant discourses in the socio-cultural context of organizations are of great importance if we are to understand how workforce diversity is understood and performed in the organization. Difference, it is (correctly) argued, is socially constructed and under constant redefinition due to the influence of competing discourses and existing structures of power (Ahonen et al., 2014; Knoppers et al., 2015; Lorbiecki and Jack, 2000; Van Laer and Janssens, 2011; Zanoni and Janssens, 2004). In order to 'unmask' power dynamics, it is illustrated how diversity management as a managerial practice can be a form of managerial control by defining minority employees in fixed, essential groups with negative connotations (see also Tatli and Özbilgin, 2012a; Ghorashi and Sabelis, 2013; Zanoni et al., 2010; Boogaard and Roggeband 2009; 2000; Simon and Oakes, 2006; Roberson, 2006).

Besides such a broader socio-cultural focus on contexts, which deals with how power discourses influence diversity management, there is also a body of literature that deals with different socio-historical contexts in different national cultures. Here, Omanovic (2009), for example, discusses diversity management from a dialectical socio-historical perspective where he shows the dependence of diversity management on national translations. The term diversity is often taken for granted and, as a result, many different definitions are used interchangeably without clear definitions (Jonsen et al., 2011). In practice, however, it seems to translate locally due to its various backgrounds. For example, in Scandinavia diversity is deeply intertwined with the development of both the gender equality debate and later the ethnic minority debate. In the US, for example, it is associated more with race and multi-culturalism (see also Boxenbaum, 2006).

## ***Organizational context***

Despite the unquestioned value of the above critical literature, the organizational-level analysis – as proposed by Jonsen et al. (2011) – is highly underrepresented in diversity management research. Typically, it gets attention in relation to top-management involvement. Here, however, it is also heavily and almost unanimously argued that top-level support is crucial for diversity projects specifically (and HRM projects in general) to gain legitimacy and become embedded throughout the organization (Tatli and Alasia, 2011). To do this, management needs to show commitment not only by supporting the project financially but also by promoting the project publicly and participating in diversity workshops. While many critical studies (rightfully and usefully) expose the influences of broader socio-cultural and socio-historical contexts on the practice of diversity management, very few studies adopt an intra-organizational, qualitative and dynamic approach to the study of organizational contexts. It is this gap that we address in this paper. As such, our theoretical point of departure maintains that workforce diversity is not only nationally and culturally situated but also evolves according to its organizational-political situatedness, which is worth examining critically. In this sense, we utilize what we call a *micro socio-cultural perspective* as we focus on how the local organizational premises of the diversity project influence the way it develops over time.

## **Methodology**

### ***Research context***

In order to gain rich, robust descriptions at the micro socio-cultural level, the first author of this paper followed a ‘Diverse and Global Workforce’ project in the Scandinavian technology company PharmaTech (a pseudonym). The project was followed from March 2012 until the project closed down in January 2013. Following this, the author conducted half a dozen more interviews, which occurred up until the end of his three-year-long industrial PhD fellowship (ending in June 2015). Considering the fellowship was partly funded by PharmaTech, the author spent half his working time there (the other half at the university) and thus was able to stay in contact with those associated with the project. All in all, this ethnographic method provided us with rich data from the organizational context in which the Diverse and Global Workforce project was initiated, developed and terminated.



PharmaTech employs more than 40.000 people and estimates a significant expansion in its global workforce in the coming decade. PharmaTech is a global market leader within its field and has long been known for its progressive diversity policies and practices. In the years preceding the start of this ethnographic study, PharmaTech was planning to initiate projects focusing on future growth and the challenges associated with predicting and managing the demands of a diverse future workforce. In 2012 the company instituted the so-called Diverse and Global Workforce project. The aim of the project was to seek inclusiveness, remain critical of dominant stereotypes, and to rework the organizational approach to the workforce in a manner that accounted for cultural differences among employees. In other words, it resembled a project adhering to the critical spirit of an ‘emic’ approach where categories were not developed in advance, but were rather allowed to develop naturally in accordance with the political and cultural context of the organization.

In line with this, the project team early on listed specific areas of interest, including individual differences, cultural differences and values, as well as ‘customization’ of organizational processes as a way to accommodate employee differences. Two central assumptions underpinning the project were:

- The workforce is becoming more diverse due to the future growth, globalization and increased age and generational composition.
- There is a demand for tailored solutions in order to better meet specific employee needs and so a one-size-fits-all approach to the organizational workforce must be replaced by a *one-size-does-not-fit-all* approach.

Given that diversity was formulated in such salient and emergent ways, the project represented an ideal opportunity to follow how a diversity management project develops over time – i.e. how workforce diversity translates and transforms in the organization as the project develops.

### ***Data collection***

In order to gain a rich understanding of how the project travelled and developed through the organization, the ethnographic study of the Diverse and Global Workforce project was approached with an open-ended research agenda and a loose theoretical framework, the kind of open approach envisaged by Czarniawska when she argues that:

[F]ieldwork knows no ‘method’; it relies on pragmatism, luck, and moral sensibility. The knowledge of a variety of techniques, and the will to innovate rather than follow static prescriptions of method books, remain central to the craft of fieldwork, as to all others. (Czarniawska, 2008b: 10)

‘Ethnographic fieldwork’ then refers to a style of research rather than a single method – a style that uses a variety of techniques in order to collect empirical material (Brewer, 2000). The goal was to provide an emergent, thick description and explanation of the unfolding content and outcomes of the processes the project team undertook to conceptualise and manage a diverse workforce under the aegis of the Diverse and Global Workforce project. As part of the ethics approval for this project, the first author’s identity and interests were declared to all participants. He attended planned meetings and interviews, but also followed his intuition in searching for new sources of information, following interesting occurrences and rephrasing questions as they arose, as well as enjoying serendipitous conversations about unexpected issues (cf. Marcus, 1998). The researcher used participant-observational techniques, conducted formal and informal interviews, and collected documentary materials as part of the ethnographic fieldwork. Over the course of the 10-month data collection period, the first author participated in and observed a set of weekly two-hour project meetings, of which 90% was audio-recorded (generating about 150 hours of recorded meetings). The first author conducted formal interviews – both unstructured and semi-structured – and numerous other informal conversational interviews about the project. Daily field-note journals were maintained during the study, with the content organized by section to enable iterative analysis and personal reflection.

Spradley (1979) argues that ethnographic fieldwork is, by default, translation. Doing ethnography thus involves the act of interpreting, translating and presenting findings in a unique and personalized way, where the researcher’s decisions are central to constructing the findings. Wolcott argues that ethnographic research involves something ‘more’ than simply collecting data (Wolcott, 2005: 5).

Whatever constitutes this elusive ‘more’ makes all the difference. That needs to be stated emphatically, for a crucial aspect of fieldwork lies in recognizing when to be unmethodical, when to resist the potential endless task of accumulating data and begin searching for underlying patterns, relationships and meaning. (Wolcott, 2005: 5)

Part of this elusive ‘more’ points to the open-ended, flexible and emergent approach when choosing methods. Considering the constructionist claim that ‘no real world out-there (whether it exists or not) can be accounted for objectively by any observer’ (Czarniawska, 2008a: 3) points to how no method is neutral. We embrace such a constructionist perspective and instead argue that any method generates, or constructs, the empirical material. In addition, and of equal importance, we recognize that the empirical material constructs any phenomena under investigation. In this view, ‘gathering’ or ‘collecting’ empirical data is an imprecise description of what occurred. Simply put, the researcher contributes to the construction of the concept under investigation – in this case ‘a diverse and global workforce’ – simply by making choices about which methods to use.

An abductive approach recognizes how the researcher constructs the phenomena studied by emphasizing how theory, methodology and empirical material are continuously assessed and constructed (Alvesson and Kärreman, 2011; Alvesson and Sandberg, 2013). Inspired by the promise of research in ‘favor of interesting, challenging and novel ideas’ (Alvesson and Kärreman, 2011: 75), the first author created what Reichertz refers to as an ‘abductive climate’ by adopting an ‘*attitude* of preparedness to abandon old convictions and to seek new ones’ (Reichertz, 2007: 22). One way to adopt an attitude open to different interpretations was to start mapping and categorizing multiple ways of viewing and interpreting the empirical material. In addition to keeping a logbook in which he wrote personal reflections, the first author kept a ‘brainstorming document’ in which he wrote down different ways to conceptualize and interpret the case. Five months into the project, this document contained 61 different perspectives. The researcher started revisiting this ‘brainstorming document’ on a regular basis. While some of these perspectives focused on topics far from the central theme of this paper, several of them centred on the conceptualization of workforce diversity.

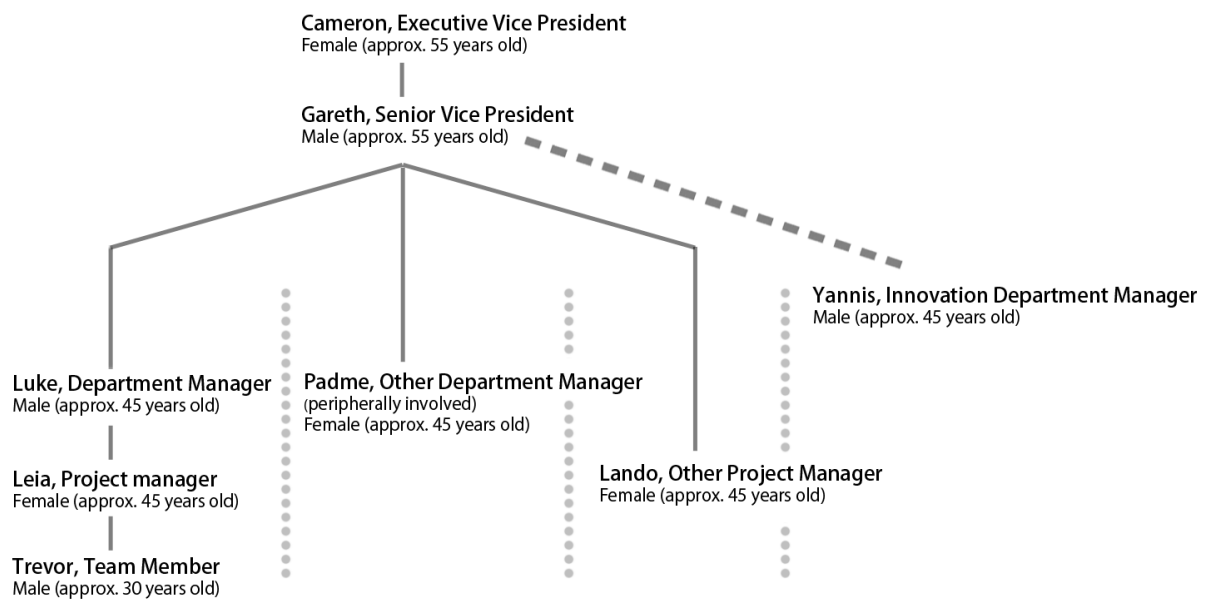
### ***Research participants***

The study took place in PharmaTech’s global HRM division, an area of work focusing on the provision of global processes that relate to the management of the company’s workforce. As will be unfolded below, several stakeholders happened to gain influence over the Diverse and Global Workforce project. In line with the emergent methodology, the informants central to the research were selected based on their hierarchical levels of importance to the project. At the end, these ended up being:

- Global HRM divisional management consisting of Gareth (Senior Vice President) and Cameron (Executive Vice President).
- The ‘Diverse and Global Workforce project team’ situated in the global HRM division consisting of the project manager Leia (Team Member 1) and Trevor (Team Member 2).
- Yannis, the Innovation Department Manager.
- Three Department Managers in close proximity to the project; Luke, Padme and Lando.

Below is a figure that shows the hierarchical positions of all informants included in this paper. The informants will be further introduced as they are presented in the analysis.

**Figure 1.** Informants included in the quotes presented in this paper.



All informants presented in this paper have been given pseudonyms. Moreover, the hierarchical structure portrayed in this paper mimics the structure of the company – though pseudonym job titles have been given to the employees in order to better secure anonymity.

### ***Data analysis***

‘Following the project’ calls for a narrative approach to data presentation and analysis (Gabriel, 2008). Thus, similar to allowing the unfolding of events guide the path of data collections, we also construct the narrative of the analysis according to the way the project

evolved. In doing so, we did not set out to look for specific organizational contextual dynamics, which would potentially influence the project, but instead allowed the process of the project itself to determine which dynamics seemed critical. As such, the analysis provides a narrative account of ‘what happened and how this led to that’. Thereby, three key decisions marked significant transpirations in the project, which again influenced the way workforce diversity was constructed and understood in the organization. The three key decisions included: *getting economic resources*, *accommodating to a strategic agenda*, and *not addressing the ‘common employee’* (see Figure 2). The foregrounding of these three key decisions over others was derived from the experiences of the ethnographer in the field, the attention eventually given to these decisions – both by project participants and the researcher – as the project unfolded, by the researcher’s ongoing and retrospective efforts to make sense of the project, and finally the supporting evidence collected in the process of reviewing notes, interviews and observations. The three central decisions are illustrated below in Figure 2. In the forthcoming analysis, we show how organizational contextual dynamics related to these decisions contributed to the construction of a contextually situated ‘workforce diversity’. We will therefore distinguish between *key decisions* and *contextual dynamics*. While key decisions are guided by the people working on the project (i.e. the project team), the ‘contextual dynamics’ refer to external influences stemming from sources not directly related to the people working on the project and therefore outside the influence of the project team.

**Figure 2.** The three boxes illustrate the key decisions taken by the Diverse and Global Workforce team.



## Analysis

Prior to the official launch of the Diverse and Global Workforce project, the global HRM division had an ongoing debate regarding the increasing diversity of the workforce. In this debate, workforce diversification was seen to result from multiple trends, such as the growth in the number of employees, globalization, the introduction of new technologies, and more. At this early stage, interest revolved around exploring future workforce trends, as well as reaching a consensus on the idea that the workforce was in fact becoming increasingly diverse. This led to

greater interest in exploring new approaches to the workforce that would enable a more inclusive organizational setup and as such a more diverse workforce. In this early stage and before the project was formally launched, workforce diversity was debated as an *open-ended* concept in which workforce diversity took the form of a salient and emergent phenomenon influenced by multiple trends, whatever they might be. Here, workforce diversity was not reduced to a set of fixed and dominant social categories and binaries (Ahonen et al., 2014; Frenkel and Stenhav, 2006; Muhr 2008), but was instead open for negotiation and change. Departing from this open-ended representation of workforce diversity, the following analysis will show how the three key decisions shown in Figure 2, changed the way workforce diversity was conceptualized.

### ***1<sup>st</sup> key decision: Bringing more economic resources to the project***

#### **Becoming an ‘innovation project’**

Though the Diverse and Global Workforce project had been planned since 2009, and the global HRM division was already scoping for an open-ended approach to its diverse workforce, the project was only officially launched in 2012 following a top-level consultancy report advocating for an increased focus on innovation. In light of its heavy dependency on its main product, PharmaTech had spent recent years mapping its challenges and opportunities in order to ensure ongoing innovativeness. Concerning the company’s innovative capabilities, the same consultancy report concluded:

We believe that [PharmaTech] should connect a small number of initiatives under the headline of innovation, and pursue them in a coordinated fashion, sponsored individually and collectively by executive management. While we do not think this should be done at a scale that in any way disrupts the organization, it is important that executive management takes a clear leadership role with these selected projects.

As a result, PharmaTech’s executive management established the Innovation Project Fund supervised by a newly-established Innovation Department. All departments within PharmaTech could therefore apply for funding and receive extra monetary resources in order to establish an ‘innovation project’. The global HRM division had already planned, yet not launched, the Diverse and Global Workforce project and so the opportunity to apply for extra resources came at a convenient time. The global HRM division eventually applied for these extra resources

under the aegis of the Innovation Project Fund. Out of 25 applications, five projects were selected, the Diverse and Global Workforce project being one of them. The project was then formally established as a result of a successful application process and a set of employees was assigned to spend time on the project, forming what we refer to as ‘the project team’, consisting of Leia, Trevor and Luke (see Figure 1).

### **Receiving executive management attention**

The Diverse and Global Workforce project went from having no formal footprint – a conceptual idea of exploring how contemporary workforce trends were making the workforce increasingly diverse – to being accepted as an ‘innovation project’, and as such becoming formally established and receiving extra funds. Through its selection as an innovation project, the Diverse and Global Workforce project awakened the attention of executive management. In a company that runs thousands of projects, having the attention of executive management leverages such a project into a different league. Moreover, projects are often run on tight budgets, therefore additional resources would open up new opportunities.

It all originated from the [consultancy report] pointing out that we could use an innovative culture, also beyond R&D. In [the global HRM division] that process was driven by a desire for every [Senior Vice President area] to provide an ‘innovation project’. At the same time [the project] matched an internal need in [the global HRM division] for understanding future trends. So it was sort of a win-win. We had this idea already, and we might as well try to have it financed by executive management. (Leia, Project Manager)

Considering top management interpreted ‘innovation’ broadly, quite a few projects could fit comfortably within this term. It was, however, questionable whether this was in fact a clear-cut ‘innovation’ project:

Innovation was a box that encapsulated some of this adequately, some of this ‘thinking a bit further ahead’ and being ‘future oriented’. I’m not sure this is the right way to do it, but that was the coupling that eventually was made. And we decided to view [the Diverse and Global workforce project] as an innovation project... We applied for resources and this fitted well into it. (Luke, Department Manager)

Not only does the case we present concern a project set to investigate the challenges of an increasingly diverse workforce with a corporate and global outlook, but the project also had what seemed like a fortunate position in the sense that it was the first of its kind – a global diversity project – to receive extended attention from executive management. Furthermore, the project was mentioned in the annual report – something many project managers desire – but only few get to experience. Early on, the project team was enthusiastic about the extra resources and attention that came along with being labelled an ‘innovation project’, and this was seen as positive for the development of the project. For example, the team expected that some of the resources could be directed at interviews with and surveys of those ‘common employees’ outside corporate headquarters in order to gain a better understanding of the state of the workforce in different parts of the organization – what we refer to as an *employee-centric focus*. In the following section, we unfold how the focus shifted from this employee-centric focus, to a more top-management and strategic oriented focus and discuss the consequences that this change had on the way workforce diversity was conceptualized.

### **Change of governance structure**

Prior to becoming one of the five selected innovation projects, the Diverse and Global Workforce project was intended to be a small-scale project governed only by the global HRM divisional management. The transformation into an ‘innovation project’, however, had radical consequences. For one the governance structure was changed seeing as both the global HRM division and the newly established Innovation Department would have to supervise the project. The introduction of the Innovation Department and the resulting two governing bodies meant that the project was entering into new territory. Each body had their respective agendas and expectations of how the project should be run and what the outcome should be. The main concern of Yannis, the manager of the Innovation Department, was to develop and test an Innovation Process Model – an approach to doing innovation that would discipline the act of innovating and reduce it to a series of steps to follow – that (hopefully) would lead to innovative outcomes. Both Gareth, the global HRM division’s Senior Vice President, and Cameron, the Executive Vice President, were concerned with ensuring that the project delivered relevant inputs to executive management now that it had received such extraordinary attention. This implied that the Diverse and Global Workforce project was being assessed on its relevance to executive management.



## ***2<sup>nd</sup> key decision: Workforce diversity accommodating to a strategic agenda***

As the project came under executive management's spotlight, other trending topics among top management were integrated into the project; for example, *talent attraction, performance* and the *age-dispersion within the workforce* turned out to be integral parts of the project agenda. What started out as an interest in exploring the consequences of changing workforce demographics and assessing broader societal workforce trends took a different turn. The project changed its aspirations by shifting its focus to attracting talent, improving employee performance and addressing the increased life expectancy among employees – in particular how to deal with late career employees who were high performing and wanted to stay in their jobs (such as late career executive managers).

Broadening the scope of the project to include other topics also had consequences for the way workforce diversity was conceptualized. For example, the focus on performance and talent attraction was illustrated through the ways in which the team conceptualized the employee prototype of a young *high-performing* male and subsequently presented this prototype as a facilitator for discussions at workshops. Moreover, the focus on increased life expectancy among the workforce meant that *age* became a dominant signifier in conceptualizing workforce diversity. The concept of workforce diversity changed from being open-ended, unspecified, focused on workforce trends and the investigation of changes in the organizations workforce demographics, to being reduced to specific management-directed characteristics; that is, it became a phenomenon to help address issues around talent attraction, employee performance and the increased life expectancy of employees.

## ***3<sup>rd</sup> key decision: Not addressing the 'common employee'***

### **Extensive reporting obligations**

Another consequence of increased executive management attention was the requirement of the team to make reports to these executive managers. This turned out to be a critical driver in the 3<sup>rd</sup> key decision. Gareth, the Senior Vice President, went through these reports prior to their approval. If Gareth required any changes to parts of the reports, the team were obligated to rewrite those parts before they were sent to executive management.

Since we were an innovation project, we needed to provide continuous reports and that has taken up massive resources. A good example is the Global Senior Management meeting – you know that yearly meeting for the top 250 employees in all of [the company]. The innovation projects were presented at this meeting and a substantial amount of resources was spent doing this. Even though it was such a short session of 5 to 10 minutes, we spent so much time on this, considering what story we wished to tell, what slides should be presented and so on. We had a lot of meetings with [the global HRM Senior Vice President] and [the Executive Vice President] as [she] was supposed to give a broad intro [to the project]. Looking at it today, I'm thinking there's been so much reporting on this. (Luke, Department Manager)

Ironically, the extra monetary resources gained from being framed as an innovation project backfired when extra resources were drained from the project in order to accommodate extensive reporting obligations. Given that extensive periods of time were spent framing and phrasing the reports correctly in order to fit the executive management agenda, the team began viewing executive management attention as having indirect obstructive consequences on the development of the project. No direct reports were given to the CEO or other executive managers; rather many of these reports had to go through Gareth, the global HRM Senior Vice President, Cameron, the Executive Vice President as well as Yannis the Innovation Department manager. According to Trevor, this led to a manipulation of information.

[T]aking innovation projects with a high degree of uncertainty and making them executive management funded and putting them in the Senior Vice President areas, makes for a complete contradiction – having something with a high degree of uncertainty [referring to the innovation projects] and expecting them all to be highly successful. Naturally, they can't, so instead they're manipulated, coordinated, twisted and turned all it can take, in order to live up to that. (Trevor, Team Member)

Hence, what the project team believed to be the most relevant findings sometimes ended up being 'manipulated, coordinated, twisted and turned' before it was presented – not by the team, but by someone else – to executive management.

The extensive reporting obligations had consequences for how workforce diversity was conceptualized. Instead of having time and money to engage with employees beyond the global HRM division, the team was forced to reduce their outreach in favour of engaging only with departments within the global HRM division. More extensive plans to interview and survey

employees beyond the global HRM division were dropped and, instead, smaller scale workshops involving other global HRM departments were initiated. This meant that the employee-centric focus was abandoned, in part to fulfil reporting requirements. Having a broad employee outreach, as initially planned, was expected to point to the many nuances of PharmaTech's diverse workforce, potentially leading to a broad and inclusive conceptualization of workforce diversity. Instead, workforce diversity ended up being defined based on a limited set of inputs guided by management.

### **Increased managerial control**

As noted above Yannis, the Innovation Department Manager, and Gareth, the global HRM Senior Vice President, had different project expectations, which the team had to accommodate. Over time, however, Gareth took on an even more controlling role by taking over project presentations, what Luke refers to as 'fronting the project' in the quote below.

Sure, I've also presented [at committee meetings], but [the global HRM Senior Vice President] has been the one 'fronting' the project. So he's the one to please in many ways, and this has been... From one viewpoint this has been an advantage, but from another this has been a disadvantage, because the project was focusing too much on [pleasing the Senior Vice President] – and not so much on what the common employee or the Centre's of Excellence needed. I think we did sort of the same when we worked with diversity, back when we did the first diversity strategy in 2007-2008. There was a great focus on [the Executive Vice President] and [the global HRM Senior Vice President], and that makes it difficult to navigate through. (Luke, Department Manager)

According to one team member, part of the reason why the Senior Vice President and Executive Vice President became so involved was to ensure project success.

When you have an executive management funded project, but the project does not have direct reporting to executive management, and instead is placed within a divisional management area, the [Senior Vice President] really wants to see this project become a success. And they want to do many things in order to make the project successful, for if it is not a success, there is a very high visibility around it and that goes straight to the top. (Trevor, Team Member)

By taking over presentations, management ensured that what was being presented was in line with what they deemed important to make the project a success. This, however, meant that

the team was striving to both comply with the needs of management while also pursuing what they and others deemed a relevant understanding of workforce diversity. More specifically, as a result of top-management concern over the increased number of late-career employees in corporate head quarters, the team was told by management to investigate the age distribution within the workforce. However, the team also held workshops with other departments within the global HRM division. At some of these workshops, people expressed their frustration regarding the dominant focus on age. Consequently, the team simultaneously began developing a set of locally constructed categories called Life Situations. Life Situations were carefully crafted so that they were age *independent* and therefore could appeal to other actors within the organization. These categories acted as ‘counter categories’ to the dominant age category.

Age and its counter categories shaped the way workforce diversity was conceptualized. Instead of getting insights from elsewhere in the organization, the characteristics that defined workforce diversity were constructed based on inputs from nearby management and other employees in close proximity to the team (i.e. employees in other departments in the global HRM division). The conceptualization of workforce diversity therefore ended up including categories that appealed to different interests in close geographical and professional proximity. The conflict within the organization left a mark on the conceptualization of workforce diversity in the sense that the categories chosen represented different stances in this conflict. The conceptualization of workforce diversity therefore became a tool to help mediate a conflict between organizational actors.

### **Workforce diversity as a ‘window dressing’ concept**

By the end of the project period, the team’s view of executive management involvement had changed from one of enthusiasm to one of frustration. Due to minimal interaction with employees outside corporate headquarters, the project team was forced to make weighty assumptions regarding the needs of these ‘common’ employees. An increasingly critical tone developed as those involved began questioning the actual purpose of the project:

**Interviewer:** I wonder why a project such as [Diverse and Global Workforce project] is launched... Why are they putting money into this?

**Trevor (Team Member):** Because it is a prestige window dressing project.

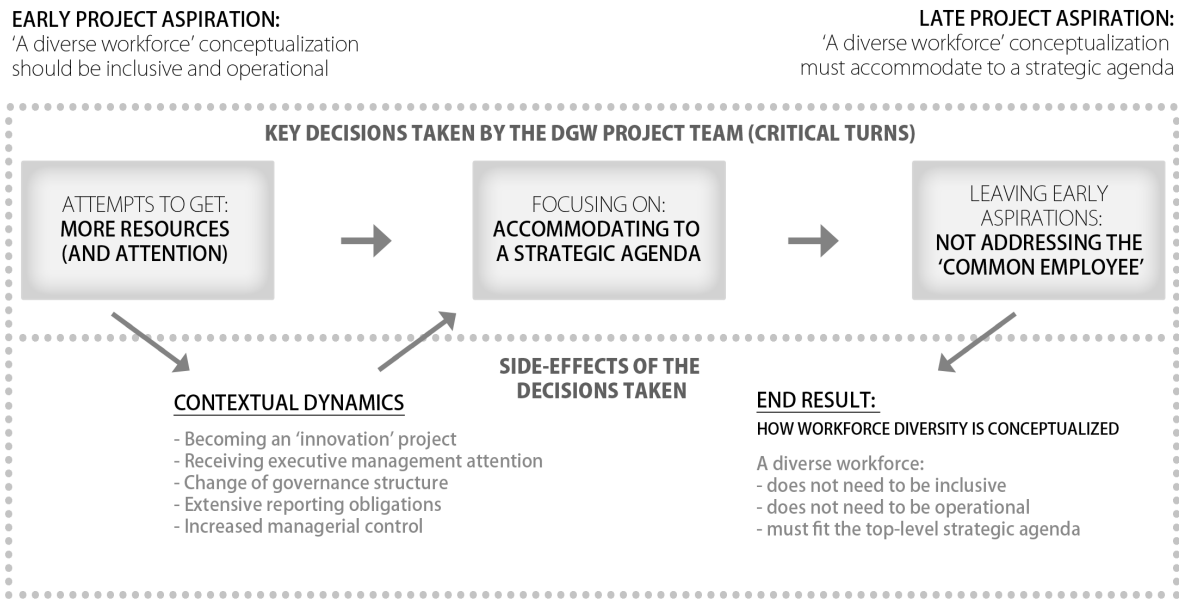
**Lando (other Department Manager):** That is precisely what it is, a window dressing project. [Diverse and Global Workforce project] is truly a window dressing project.

Employees within the global HRM division began to perceive the project as a window dressing project and, as such, grew sceptical over the organization's willingness to engage in diversity issues. Consequently, workforce diversity was rendered without any real impact. Moreover, the team members began to engage in discussions not only on possible ways to remove themselves from the project but also on how best to avoid associations with the project.

### ***Summarizing three key decisions and their contextual dynamics***

We have endeavoured to illustrate the development of the Diverse and Global Workforce project as it unfolded. By reflecting on the process that created the current state of affairs, we gained insight into how – through high reporting demands and the appropriation of parts of the project (i.e. at presentations, etc.) by local management – executive management attention led to increased managerial control. Contrary to what may initially appear logical – that high-level management involvement benefitted the project – we argue that this in fact caused critical problems. Based on the information provided we are now able to unfold the previously presented Figure 2. We highlight three key decisions undertaken by the project team. In the figure below, we present the contextual dynamics that accompanied these decisions. While the three key decisions represent actions controlled by the project team, the contextual dynamics represent outcomes beyond the team's control. By illustrating the influence of these dynamics, Figure 3 below builds upon the argument presented in Figure 2 and points to the importance of the contextual dynamics that exist beyond the control of the people driving a workforce diversity agenda. The figure displays how these dynamics, rather than addressing the common employee, led to a diversity project in which corporate politics and top-management agendas dominated.

**Figure 3.** The figure below illustrates how an aspiration to conceptualize a diverse workforce based on inclusiveness and relevance for existing HRM departments was transformed into a conceptualization of a diverse workforce based on strategic and top-management political agendas.



## Discussion

### *Challenging and nuancing a dominant belief in workforce diversity research*

In order to understand the dialectical power dynamics of workforce diversity (e.g. Lorbiecki and Jack, 2000; Zanoni and Janssens, 2004), diversity management literature has called for further research on the influence of context. Despite increased – and important – focus on the socio-historical context of diversity, the field of diversity management continues to display an absence of critical analyses on how organizational-level influences impact the way diversity is perceived, understood, and thus implemented and practised in organizations. By examining the way in which a global diversity initiative was introduced, developed and terminated in a major global Scandinavian organization, this paper takes one step toward addressing this gap.

Major arguments concerning the influence of organizational-level contextual effects on diversity management projects have thus far been confined to a plethora of books and articles that stress the importance of top-level support in various ways (e.g. Agars and Koffte, 2005; Tatli and Alasia, 2011; Williams, 2013). The argument maintains that in order for diversity

management to succeed top-level support is crucial, as it creates resources, legitimacy, diffusion and broad commitment. In our case, however, it is notable that the ‘perfect setup’, namely, a workforce diversity project allocated extraordinary economic resources and increased executive management attention, backfired as the project evolved. Here, the automatic tendency of the project managers to seek out executive attention and additional finances resulted in a series of unforeseen events that affected conceptualizations of workforce diversity. This highlights the need to not simply strive for resources and top-managerial involvement, but to also critically assess the consequences that such involvement may cause.

Contrary to earlier studies that emphasized the lack of critique of managerial practices and subsequent underlying power relations (see for example Zanoni and Janssen (2004), our case shows how an initial positive attitude toward management involvement turned critical and was accompanied by a reconceptualization of workforce diversity as a window-dressing concept. This indicates that despite, and perhaps partly because of, top management support, the diversity initiative lost its connection to the workforce and thereby the interests and opinions of the employees themselves, who were the original ‘targets’ of the initiative. Due to initial top-level (monetary) support, the project gained legitimacy throughout the organization. However, following the re-labelling of the project as an innovation project, a series of events unfolded that effectively diverted attention away from global diversity, cultural differences and workforce trends. As a result, the initial notion of ‘one-size-does-not-fit-all’ – i.e. the un-categorical and bottom-up approach favoured by critical diversity scholars (e.g. Ahonen et al., 2014; Lorbiecki and Jack, 2000; Muhr, 2008) – dissolved, and the project ended up being perceived as a ‘window-dressing’ project promoting management’s agenda.

The ‘easy’ interpretation here would centre on a critique of top management’s handling of the process and their appropriation of project ownership in a way that forced the team into a more peripheral role. However, such clarifications are not so straightforward in this case. If, in keeping with those who assess how external power discourses influence workforce diversity (e.g. Zanoni and Janssens, 2004), we take a more dialectic approach to power and politics, we detect something else at play. Our perspective foregrounds how power is not only performed through visible direct measures but also through the subtle everyday actions of micro-politics (e.g. Fleming and Spicer, 2014; Thomas and Davies, 2005). Our aim is not to disagree with arguments that favour top-level support, but rather to add to this argument by developing an understanding of how organizational politics influences diversity management initiatives in unforeseen and unpredictable ways.

## ***The unpredictability of open-ended and emergent workforce diversity***

Top-level support changed the circumstances surrounding the project and initiated a series of events that the project team had no control over. Such changes ended up greatly affecting the way workforce diversity was understood. However, these changes all stemmed from a locally-driven (not top-level) decision to apply for Innovation Project Fund money. The opportunity to receive more economic resources and the accompanying contextual dynamics (see Figure 3) were not seen as unfavourable until it was too late. This finding illustrates the way a conceptualization of workforce diversity can unfold in unpredictable ways, and how this is sometimes attached to a bigger and more important agenda (such as getting resources or managerial attention). Therefore, our case shows that the coupling of contextual dynamics is crucial for the way workforce diversity is socially constructed and, thereby, how diversity management projects are perceived in organizations. Perhaps, due to the open and emergent approach to workforce diversity adopted by the team, the conceptualization of workforce diversity was particularly susceptible to contextual dynamic influences. We do not argue that diversity should be more strictly defined, as this would jeopardize the benefits of an un-categorical approach and reinstate diversity management within the confines of the difference-sameness dilemma identified by critical diversity management scholars (e.g. Ghorashi and Sabelis, 2013). However, we argue that in order to manage such an unstable and emergent concept, a greater understanding of this instability and emergence is required. In light of this, and in an attempt to better comprehend how workforce diversity acts in and is shaped by a specific context, we unfold the notion of protean diversity below.

### ***Workforce diversity as protean***

The adjective protean is derived from the myth of the Greek god of the sea Proteus, who was able to shape change at will (Hall, 2004). Proteanism has been debated, albeit scarcely, in other social scientific disciplines, such as the psychology of the self (Lifton, 1999) and career studies (Hall, 1996; Hall, 2004; Briscoe et al., 2006). To understand complex power dynamics and the ways in which they influence the concept of workforce diversity, Hall's (1996) discussion on protean careers has proven helpful. Hall argues that careers are shaped as people and their environment change over time. A protean concept is characterized by its fluidity and in particular by its ability to adapt to contextual circumstances as they change. While 'protean



diversity' constitutes a new contribution to workforce diversity research, there are existing studies that point in a similar direction. Omanović (2009) notes how different actors and milieus, and their often-conflicting ideas and interests, shape diversity and its management. He points to the socio-historical relationships that reflect diversity's on-going productions. Our paper contributes to such a dialectical perspective on workforce diversity by showing how attempts to conceptualize workforce diversity change as a set of contextual dynamics influence the concept.

Introducing the term 'protean diversity' has implications for the way we think about workforce diversity. If viewed in terms of our case, we find that workforce diversity evolves according to changes in the surrounding environment. We thus seek to introduce the term 'protean' into workforce diversity research to emphasize the changing and versatile nature of the workforce diversity concept, as exemplified by the case presented in this paper. As argued by several scholars (see for example Ailon-Sounday and Kunda, 2003; Ellis, 1994; Muhr and Salem, 2013; Rynes and Rosen, 1995), contextual dynamics have the ability to not only marginalize and stereotype people but also dissolve and evaporate the understanding of differences and diversity. This in turn renders such concepts empty – i.e. ends up being perceived merely as window-dressing. It is not only the stereotypes that prevent diversity projects from succeeding (Ailon-Sounday and Kunda, 2003), it is also the politics and power of the organization itself that plays a crucial role in how workforce diversity is constructed.

Recognizing workforce diversity as protean has consequences for the way we address workforce diversity issues in organizations. To engage with such locally situated, versatile and continuously evolving concept researchers as well as practitioners are required to assess the influence of contextual dynamics. By paying attention to how contextual dynamics interact with workforce diversity we can become attentive to strategic agendas. Ahonen et al. (2014) argue that acknowledging the importance of context as a component of power relations is key to unmasking the ways in which power functions in the production of diversity. We have shown how organizational context matters to workforce diversity – that is, it becomes a shape-shifting concept rather than one guided by aspirations to change conditions for employees. This deterioration accentuates the need to recognize the effects of contextual dynamics on the concept of workforce diversity.

Moreover, our case raises a pertinent concerns for future research when it comes to open-ended and un-categorical approaches to workforce diversity. Are open-ended and vaguely defined workforce diversity approaches at greater risk of acting protean? Do these approaches

too easily adapt to the context in which they act? As our case indicates, such an open-ended approach can become problematic when unintended contextual dynamics take control of the project, thereby ‘pulling’ the project, and as such the conceptualization of workforce diversity, in unintentional and sometimes unfortunate directions.

## Conclusion

We have shown how an open-ended and emergent approach to workforce diversity makes the concept ecologically assembled in combination with its surrounding contextual dynamics – in other words how workforce diversity acts *protean*. These findings point to the need for workforce diversity research to adopt a broader and more situated perspective on diverse workforces in organizations, as opposed to one that narrows in on diversity in any given workforce. Workforce diversity is not simply a matter of difference within the workforce, it is a protean concept linked to other dynamics, which, at first glance, might seem unrelated. Moreover, the findings emphasize the importance of not only studying how organizations overcome diversity issues, but also the way organizations construct workforce diversity issues they seek to tackle. Typically, workforce diversity projects are initiated due to either the lack or the increase of diversity in an organization; for example, an overrepresentation of males in management, an increase in the number of employees within an organization, or the inclusion of new geographical regions or proficiencies. However, as shown in this paper, workforce diversity can be a protean concept that easily adapts to new agendas as well as a concept that is at risk of deteriorating into evasive conceptualizations. Put in other words, it is not the differences among people (i.e. the demarcations drawn to delineate workforce diversity) that should claim centrality in diverse workforce research, but rather the ways in which the notion is produced, presented and negotiated in a given context.

The case of the Diverse and Global Workforce project is not unique in the sense that it is not uncommon that diversity projects, and other ‘philanthropic’ initiatives, sometimes risk benefitting the corporate image rather than making actual changes to the way business is conducted. However, what is rare about this case is the access provided by the company PharmaTech. Following the progression of the Diverse and Global Workforce project has provided rare insights into the initial design phase of such a diversity project – in which dominating diversity traits are under negotiation – from a top-level corporate perspective. As scholars, we require these critical investigations into corporate and top-level politics if we are to

understand how these diversity projects can combat political manoeuvrings, manipulation and window dressing. The honest and open account of the ‘behind the scenes’ events presented in this paper are an important lesson in why some diversity projects fail, or worse, why these projects are ‘successful’ despite not being so in the eyes of some of the employees closest to the projects.

The findings in this paper illustrate a final key point. If diversity is protean, then we as researchers need to ask ourselves: ‘How do we produce diversity?’ (Ahonen et al., 2014). Contextual dynamics are not simply elements that exist beyond the influence of those studying them. Rather, researchers situate workforce diversity within a particular context, and the exploration of this situatedness is an equally relevant object of study (see for example Ahonen et al. 2014, Zanoni, et al 2010; Lorbecki and Jack, 2000). Studying research- and practice-based contextual dynamics enables us to preserve the versatility and changing nature of workforce diversity, instead of stabilizing and normalizing the concept through fixation, categorization and taxonomy (Ahonen et al., 2014).

*(Here ends Article 4. References are listed at the end of the dissertation in Chapter 8)*

# CHAPTER 7: CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

In this chapter, I address the practical, theoretical and methodological implications of the analyses presented in the previous three chapters. Since the four articles included in this dissertation each have discussions of their own, this final chapter will not revisit these earlier discussions in detail, but rather build and expand on them in order to address the research questions posed in the introductory chapter. While some, perhaps more conventional (and in particular monographic), dissertations provide separate chapters for the discussion and conclusion of the findings, I have combined them. The main reason for this is that the conclusions of each of the four papers together serve as a stepping-stone to a broader discussion of how all the papers contribute to a new understanding of workforce diversity. Therefore, the four papers' conclusions are already interwoven into the discussion presented in this chapter. I end this chapter by proposing some implications for workforce diversity research and for practitioners, followed by a brief epilogue.

## Summary of analysis

The four papers included in this dissertation can be summarized as follows:

- 1) **Article 1 presented in Chapter 2:** In this first paper, I propose an intersectional method for studying social differences in organizational settings. Here I develop an empirically-grounded approach to studying social differences, which would not only create an opportunity to reassess common assumptions but also allow for explorations beyond conventional identity theorizations (Dhamoon, 2010; Nash, 2008; Tatli and Özbilgin, 2012b). This method departs from traditional (critical) diversity scholarship in that it is process oriented yet still emphasizes stable concepts. Moreover, it does not give primacy to oppression. Finally, it adopts a critical stance on the nature of macro, meso, and micro levels as dominant analytical perspectives. This first paper focuses on the importance of intersectionality as a conceptual tool for exploring social differences.
- 2) **Article 2 presented in Chapter 4:** In this second paper, I apply the empirically-grounded approach developed in the previous article. The paper contributes to the debate over the methodological advancements of intersectional studies (Nash, 2008; Walby et al., 2012; Zanoni et al., 2010) by presenting a grounded intersectional study (Tatli and Özbilgin, 2012b). Here I illustrate how a complex categorization process can

be analyzed by ‘following categories’ and sequencing the development of these categories into critical steps.

- 3) **Article 3 presented in Chapter 5:** In this third paper, my co-authors and I introduce and demonstrate the analytical relevance of a novel theoretical perspective in workforce diversity research: the notion of boundary concepts (Löwy, 1992). By applying an STS-inspired theoretical framework on social categorization, we show how boundary concepts enable us to nuance the complex environment in which practitioners act. Specifically, we illustrate how, in a strategic context, a diverse workforce can be viewed as a mediating tool rather than a term used to encapsulate employee differences in the workforce.
- 4) **Article 4 presented in Chapter 6:** In this fourth paper, my co-author and I identify the way organizational contextual dynamics influence the way the concept of workforce diversity is constructed and understood. Curious to know why the DGW project developed the way it did, we seek to uncover the premises that led to the particular setup around the project. Here my co-author and I explore the preliminary decisions made in relation to the project, and demonstrate how these early decisions eventually led to a cascade of events that have situated the DGW project in a specific and context-dependent way. We conclude by reflecting on the way the decisions made by the team, as well as the contextual dynamics around the DGW project, affected the conceptualization of ‘a diverse workforce’. Based on these findings, we develop the concept of *protean workforce diversity* to explain how the interplay between multiple actors, both human and non-human, leads to unanticipated consequences.

## **Addressing the research questions**

In the introductory chapter, I presented the four research questions addressed in this dissertation. These are:

1<sup>st</sup> research question (RQ1):

***How is a diverse workforce constructed in an organizational setting?***

2<sup>nd</sup> research question (RQ2):

***What differences exist between organizational representations of ‘a diverse workforce’?***

3<sup>rd</sup> research question (RQ3):

***What are the main contextual factors influencing the construction of a diverse workforce?***

4<sup>th</sup> research question (RQ4):

***How can the findings in the analysis advance workforce diversity research and help overcome practical challenges to managing diverse workforces?***

As mentioned in the introductory chapter, the four research questions depart in Alvesson and Sandberg's first-, second-, third- and fourth-order questions (Alvesson and Sandberg, 2013, p. 10). RQ1, the first-order 'descriptive' question, acts as the overarching question that sets the scene for the phenomenon I investigate (Alvesson and Sandberg, 2013, p. 15). Here I seek to generate knowledge about what characterizes the phenomenon 'a diverse workforce' (what the phenomenon is, what it does, and why it has certain qualities).

I address RQ1 by comparing different representations of the phenomenon, guided by the 'comparative' research question (RQ2) (Alvesson and Sandberg, 2013, p. 16). Here I seek to generate knowledge about the way different representations of the phenomenon relate to each other (how are they similar/different to each other?). The question "what differences exist between organizational representations of 'a diverse workforce'?" (RQ2) may appear to be grounded in essentialist thinking by assuming that differences exist out there beyond my research. This, however, is not the case. I want to emphasize that the differences I investigate in RQ2 are representational constructions that arise through the interplay between the content of empirical material and my interpretation of the empirical material. Thus, the representations that I compare are stabilized simplifications developed for analytical purposes (see also Alvesson and Sandberg, 2013, p. 15).

Building on these insights and led by the 'explanatory' research question (RQ3), I seek explanation and causality for the way the phenomenon is constructed. Here I pay attention to how some of the earliest premises lead to changes in the construction of the phenomenon (Alvesson and Sandberg, 2013, p. 16). Since answering RQ1 builds on the answers from RQ2 and RQ3, these two questions (RQ2 and RQ3) can be thought of as sub-questions to RQ1.

However, rather than referring to these as sub-questions, I have decided to stay with the notions of ‘first-, second-, third- and fourth-order’ used by Alvesson and Sandberg (2013). Since answering RQ1 draws on RQ2 and RQ3, I address these two sub-questions before addressing RQ1.

Finally, led by the ‘normative’ research question (RQ4) (Alvesson and Sandberg, 2013, p. 16), I suggest that one could use the lessons learned in this dissertation when engaging with the phenomenon ‘a diverse workforce’ – both as a practitioner and as a scholar.

I use the terminology of Alvesson and Sandberg (2013) to focus my attention on the way specific types of research questions generate specific kinds of knowledge. Moreover, adopting this terminology points to how “research questions are intimately related to each other in the sense that higher order questions entail lower-order questions” (Alvesson and Sandberg, 2013, p. 15). For example, to become normative it is important to situate the researcher’s position in relation to the phenomenon, which is done by constructing a set of descriptive, comparative and explanatory questions.

## **RQ2: Comparing analytical parts 1 and 2 (Chapters 4 and 5)**

The first two empirical articles presented in Chapters 4 and 5 account for different representations of ‘a diverse workforce’ and can therefore help us address the second research question (RQ2): *What differences exist between organizational representations of ‘a diverse workforce’?* The findings of the two chapters are briefly summarized below.

- **Chapter 4** pays attention to how dominant employee categories emerge. It follows the categories as they evolve and transform due to a conflict between different actors associated to the DGW project. It illustrates the way the two dominant employee categories are produced as a result of each other’s co-existence, as well as the broader interests exerted by four central actors (the project team, the global HRM divisional manager, the Innovation Department Manager and the CoE’s). This form of representation can be summarized as ‘categorical’ (an explanation as to why will be unfolded below).

- **Chapter 5** shows how the team starts to question whether any demarcations can suffice. It seems difficult for the team to come up with a set of employee categories that accommodates the interests of all parties involved. Instead of pursuing other categories, these categories themselves are deemed problematic. The struggles that the DGW team experience when trying to construct employee categories are, in part, a result of how these new demarcations conflict with already existing demarcations used in local work practices among CoE's. To overcome this problem, the workforce is represented in narrative form, thus hiding earlier dominant employee categories. This alternative form of representation enables a multitude of interpretations that do not confine the workforce to specific categories. This form of representation can be summarized as 'anti-categorical' (again, an explanation as to why will be unfolded below).

### ***Categorical and anti-categorical representation***

Addressing RQ2, let us take a closer look at the differences between the different representations that emerge during the development of the DGW project. In short, there are two central types of representation of the workforce at play in this transformation, *categorical* and *anti-categorical*. The two representations each enable a range of possibilities and set a range of limitations. The shift in representations is a result of the problems encountered when using a well-structured and categorical representation in the specific context in which the DGW project acts. Specific employee categories already exist and are operational in many local HRM departments within the global HRM division. This makes it difficult to construct new and alternative categories since these are unlikely to be operational in areas that have already incorporated other categories into their work practices. Thus, we are faced with a situation where:

- 1) categories are constructed;
- 2) categories are reconstructed based on how the demarcations are comprehended by different actors and on the way they, in combination, address a conflict among these different actors;
- 3) and categories are hidden/dissolved.



In the first analytical part (Chapter 4), the DGW project team is mainly concerned with a 'categorical representation' of the workforce, in that the team pays central attention to creating employee categories but also in the way other organizational actors involved in the project understand these demarcations. In Chapter 4 the DGW case presented a set of clearly demarcated categories, but also demonstrated how each category did not exist independently of other dominant categories in close proximity. That is, categories are assessed based on not only what they encapsulate, but also on what other dominant categories in close proximity encapsulate. We can then think of the categorization process, which we witnessed as the DGW case unfolded, as constructing intrinsic categorical characteristics (constructing boundaries) and assessing relations among categories (evaluating overlaps and conflicts among boundaries). *Categorical representation* of a diverse workforce is then a synergetic accomplishment that draws on the existence, and/or co-creation, of other categories as well. For example, at workshops where Generations and Life Situations were presented together some employees assumed that Life Situations were age-related. Subsequently, the team spent time emphasizing that Life Situations were age-*independent*. This is an example of the way one category is shaped by other categories in close proximity.

In the second analytical part (Chapter 5), my co-authors and I illustrate the way the project team transforms the representation of the workforce into narratives in order to hide controversial demarcations. The purpose of this, in the words of one of the practitioners, is "to address the audience's interpretive horizon", that is, to enable different interpretations instead of representing the workforce as a clear-cut and well-structured object. I call this an *anti-categorical representation* of a diverse workforce, pointing to a situation where categories are absent or hidden from the representation. In particular, my co-authors and I show that such anti-categorical representation, while offering a flexible representation of the workforce, can also have traces of categorical representation. We then show that these traces of categorical representation are hidden using thick descriptions. This demonstrates that representations can exist as a balance between well-structured and loosely-structured conceptualizations – between categorical and anti-categorical representations – and that representations of a diverse workforce shift form as they evolve alongside the context in which they act. The findings illustrate how these two different representations are intertwined and how, in the case of the DGW project, the

anti-categorical representation carries ‘structural baggage’ from the earlier categorical representation.

So what can we learn from this insight? The notions of categorical and anti-categorical representation are interesting from an intersectional perspective. Categorization approaches have been a major focus in intersectional research (see for example McCall, 2005). However, the debate has mainly addressed researchers’ categorization approaches, and has, in the case of McCall (2005), been sharply divided into three main categories (inter-, intra-, and anti-categorization). For example, Yuval-Davis notes how McCall (2005) tends to see categorization approaches as mutually exclusive (Yuval-Davis, 2011, p. 8). In fairness, it should be mentioned that McCall believes that the three approaches should be conceptually understood as a continuum (McCall, 2005, p. 1773), not necessarily excluding each other, and that “some research crosses the boundaries of the continuum, belonging partly to one approach and partly to another” (McCall, p. 1774). On the contrary, the demarcations that I propose designate different phases and characteristics used by practitioners in a workforce categorization process. Therefore, the notions I suggest should not be conflated with McCall’s (2005) notions, as these notions designate different theoretical and methodological stances within intersectional literature. While McCall (2005) describes intersectional research approaches and has normative assumptions of how scholars view and research social identity categories, I propose notions that describe the different representations used by practitioners to frame workforce diversity. Importantly, the insights I present help us nuance our understanding of categorization in practice. A central point is to acknowledge that categorization is an on-going process that includes both the use and ‘un-use’ of categories. By comparing different representations, it becomes apparent that practitioners are able to mobilize both categorization and anti-categorization approaches to strategically situate representations of workforce diversity. This indicates that practitioner-based categorization approaches must be nuanced to include the co-existence of both categorization and anti-categorization. Moreover, considering that the anti-categorical phase (Chapter 5) carries historical baggage, which includes traces of pre-existing categories, the notions ‘categorization’ and ‘anti-categorization’ are perhaps better thought of as analytical demarcations rather than clearly distinguishable approaches to categorization.

### **RQ3: Contextual factors influencing the construction of a diverse workforce (Chapter 6)**

Now let us turn to the third research question (RQ3): *What are the main contextual factors influencing the construction of a diverse workforce?* In Chapter 6, I present the main contextual factors influencing the conceptualization of a diverse workforce in the DGW project setting. Here, my co-author and I illustrate how the attempt to obtain attention and economic resources results in a cascade of events that change the project into an ‘innovation project’, leading to a new governance structure, bringing top-level politics closer, leading to increased managerial control, and forcing extensive reporting onto the project team (see also Figure 3 on critical contextual factors in Chapter 6).

I highlight three specific key decisions taken by the DGW project team that either introduced new contextual factors, or subsequently, due to these newly instated factors, forced the team to change its focus and praxis. These critical decisions are:

- 1) attempting to get more resources;
- 2) accommodating a strategic agenda;
- 3) and not addressing the ‘common employee’.

What otherwise seems like a conventional endeavor for many project managers in organizations, namely to strive for executive attention and increased budget finances, leads, in the case of the DGW project, to a cascade of unforeseen events that have a significant influence on the way workforce diversity is constructed. It points to the need to critically assess the particular context that is constructed by the decisions made, which otherwise might not seem directly related to workforce diversity, such as the incorporation of executive management attention.

The central point here is that the complex interplay that arises from these decisions and the accompanied contextual factors construct a highly specific conceptualization of workforce diversity. The dynamics that these contextual factors construct could at first glance seem irrelevant and not directly related to the concept of a diverse workforce. However, as shown in Chapter 6, political struggles, the project economy, the social context, and the historical baggage all have a significant impact on the conceptualization of workforce diversity. As discussed above, in addressing RQ2, I argue that an anti-categorical representation carries traces of earlier dominant categories. In other words, that the categorical baggage that a new anti-categorical representation carries also constructs the phenomenon. In Chapter 6, I expand this argument to

include the broader context in which the phenomenon workforce diversity is situated. That is, it is important to not only adopt a narrow focus on the interplay between social identity categories, but to expand the view onto other actors, both human actors (the DGW team, the CoE's, the Innovation Department Manager, the global HRM divisional manager, and top management) and non-human actors (reports, economic resources, labeling as 'innovation', etc.). Moreover, these actors not only interact with the phenomenon in the present, but some actors formed in the past carry great influence into the present. For example, the influence of past decisions can become infrastructural and hidden to the extent that they are assumed to be an integral part of the DGW project, making it difficult to expose and address the consequences that these actors carry. Omanovic (2009, p. 359) notes that:

As ideas on diversity change context, encounters lead to hybridizations of the previous ideas, interests, actions and praxes related to diversity. Thus diversity and its management is conditioned by socio-historical relationships and therefore needs to be studied in historical, social, economic and political contexts that clearly reflect the ongoing process of diversity productions.

The findings in this dissertation point to the complex web that constructs a diverse workforce. For example, *project reports* 'assemble' the premises for how a diverse workforce is conceptualized by taking up time, thus leaving no room to incorporate inputs from other employees beyond the HRM division. This illustrates that a diverse workforce is a protean, situated and ecologically constructed concept rather than a predetermined notion. In the case of the DGW project and in the corporate and strategic setting that workforce diversity acts in, the concept becomes a shape-shifting, chameleonic concept rather than a concept guided by aspirations to change conditions for employees.

## **RQ1 (building on RQ2 and RQ3): How a diverse workforce is constructed in an organizational setting**

Now let us turn to the first research question (RQ1): *How is a diverse workforce constructed in an organizational setting?* RQ2 and RQ3 have helped us understand how a diverse workforce is constructed at PharmaTech. In this dissertation, I portray workforce diversity as a multifaceted concept that is:

- 1) used to demarcate employee characteristics (Chapter 4);
- 2) used as a tool to enable collaboration between communities that lack consensus (Chapter 5);
- 3) and a protean phenomenon influenced by human and non-human actors undergoing political maneuvers, manipulation and window dressing (Chapter 6).

### ***Constructing the phenomenon by constructing the context***

First, it should be stated clearly that studying the context in which workforce diversity is situated is key to understanding how the phenomenon is constructed. Context can mean many things, and as I have discussed in Chapter 2, ‘workforce diversity in context’ is very open and unspecific – for what is context? When a researcher locks his or her gaze onto specific actors in the context, the researcher simultaneously constructs focus points in that context. In doing so, *the researcher constructs the context* and thus indirectly also constructs the phenomenon. The context could mean different things to other researchers studying the same case, and therefore the way I accentuate some actors over others bears traces of my interpretation. The context that I construct is coupled with my engagement with the empirical setting and with my interpretation of the empirical material. In my interpretation of the context, I put emphasis on intra-organizational actors, as called for by Kalonaityte (2010), leaving out more macro-structural and societal contextual factors otherwise known to affect workforce diversity (see for example Omanovic, 2009; Boxenbaum, 2006; and Ferner et al., 2005). Moreover, I emphasize that actors do not have to exert direct influence in the present, but rather can be infrastructural and hidden, relics of past decisions that still exert great influence on workforce diversity in the present due to the cascading effects that these earlier actors invoke. This broadens the scope of context to include actors dominant at different points in time, and to consider the effects that synergies between actors create.

Constructing the context means to summarize and correlate particular actors so that they serve as pillars upon which my argument is constructed. This broad yet selective and personal assemblage of the context that I produce allows for the construction of the phenomenon as a multifaceted tool. That is, a tool for collaboration, a tool for classification and a tool for window-dressing and manipulation.

## ***Recognizing both human and non-human actors***

Secondly, I want to stress the importance of recognizing the way both human and non-human actors act together in a complex interplay that leads to a cascade of events involving new human and non-human actors which then eventually transform the conceptualization of workforce diversity. The principle of generalized symmetry (Latour, 1993; Callon, 1986) states that both human and non-human actors influence the phenomena studied (or 'assemble the networks under investigation'). This principle has the potential to advance future workforce diversity research into studies that pay greater attention to the way the phenomenon is situated in a given context. In the case of the DGW project, both human actors, such as the DGW team members, the CoE employees and the managers, as well as non-human actors, such as economic resources, project reports, different visual representations (lists, matrices/grids, texts, etc.) and employee demarcations all play a central role in shaping workforce diversity. By adopting a contextual, ecological and symmetrical perspective that includes non-human actors, we can reveal 'concealed' actors that may have otherwise been hidden from the researcher's gaze. Workforce diversity scholars interested in interdisciplinary research exploration could benefit from paying closer attention to the way STS and ANT studies tend to ascribe agency to non-human actors (see also Kennedy (2005) for a related study). This has the potential to enable a vast amount of alternative interpretations of the phenomenon. Moreover, it has the potential to enable critical assessments of the way workforce diversity tends to assume a pre-determined position within the literature. For example, consider how workforce diversity research has struggled to provide evidence as to whether increased workforce diversity is beneficial or not for organizations. For example, Dwyer et al. (2003, p. 1009) note that:

Empirical support for the diversity–performance link has, in general, been mixed (Williams and O'Reilly, 1998). This suggests that the influence of diversity on firm performance may, at least in part, depend on the organizational context. That is, the effect of diversity on performance may lie in the interaction of diversity with contextual variables.

If we acknowledge that workforce diversity is a situated, context-dependent phenomenon and that human and non-human actors co-construct it, it is perhaps little surprise that different communities disagree as to whether the concept is beneficial. In fact, the discussion – whether diversity promotes certain characteristics in organizations – becomes problematic in itself. It is

therefore not the argument of whether workforce diversity contributes to organizations or not that ought to be the preliminary focus, but rather how competing conceptualizations construct the effects we are investigating. While a contextual perspective is central in order to advance workforce diversity, scholars must also recognize that social categorization, and workforce diversity more broadly, does not in itself act in isolation in organizations. Instead, social categories and workforce diversity must be considered in relation to the ‘definers’. These definers can be the people, the institutions, or any other actors that contribute to the construction of ‘a diverse workforce’ in a given setting. Workforce diversity can only become beneficial or not in a specific situation in which the observers agree on the concept – not across communities that disagree on the concept. To unfold this statement in depth, let us turn to the final research question (RQ4).

## **RQ4: Overcoming practical challenges and advancing workforce diversity**

The fourth and final research question (RQ4) is: *How can the findings in the analysis advance workforce diversity research and help overcome practical challenges to managing diverse workforces?* To answer this question, I divide the forthcoming section into ‘practical implications’ and ‘research implications’.

### ***Practical contributions and implications***

#### **The paradox of ‘increased workforce diversity’**

To discuss the practical contributions and implications of this dissertation, let us revisit the problematic that I posed in the introduction, namely that people at PharmaTech (and the premises of the DGW project) assume that the workforce will become increasingly diverse – a conventional problem in many large and globally growing organizations. The DGW project portrays an attempt to find consensus on what an increasingly diverse workforce means. Assuming that the workforce is becoming increasingly diverse necessitates that the workforce is, at present, less diverse. This points to a predetermined notion of a diverse workforce, namely a fixed present state of the workforce as ‘less diverse’. One of the central points of this dissertation is to show the difficulties of *defining* and *agreeing on* a diverse workforce. This difficulty is equally relevant for defining what a ‘*more diverse*’ or ‘*less diverse*’ workforce

means. The diverse workforce as constructed in the DGW case showed boundary concept characteristics already at the time of the earliest phases of the DGW project, namely when people seemed to agree that the workforce was becoming increasingly diverse. Here the workforce had the potential of acting as a boundary concept, as people within the organization implicitly agreed that the workforce was less diverse at present due to the simple fact that they agreed on the workforce becoming more diverse in the future. This points to the paradox of a shared consensus that workforce diversity is increasing despite diverging understandings of what this means. Let us consider the following central premises in the DGW case.

The DGW project resided on three central assumptions that prove to be diverging arguments for why the workforce is becoming increasingly diverse:

- 1) More people entering the workforce means increased diversity (going from 43,000 to 60,000 employees).
- 2) The workforce is becoming increasingly diverse due to an increased intake of non-Scandinavians (the number of Scandinavians becomes *relatively* smaller despite increasing as the company grows).
- 3) The workforce is becoming increasingly diverse due to the shifting age dispersion within the company.

At first glance, these are all sound statements. Take the first one, for example; surely, it seems logical to assume that a workforce is becoming more diverse by adding more people to it (going from 43,000 to 60,000 employees). But is this really the case? If we consider a diverse workforce as protean, the statement proves difficult to verify. Instead of confirming that a workforce is becoming more diverse by adding more people to it, we can only partly confirm it by pointing to the underlying assumption behind this statement. Namely, that if you define workforce diversity as a quantity of people, then the answer is yes. But then again, this answer requires a shared agreement that workforce diversity is defined by the number of people. This points to how ‘a diverse workforce’ is able to have multiple meanings that sometimes contradict each other. For example, consider the following question: Is a workforce of 10,000 Scandinavians more diverse than a workforce of 5,000 people from all over the world? The question points to a paradox. Both cases can be seen to hold a more diverse workforce than the other depending on how you construct the phenomenon workforce diversity. Therefore, the



statement ‘the workforce is becoming increasingly diverse’ becomes one of the central problems of the DGW project.

The three premises listed above point to three different workforce characteristics: Nationality or ‘regionality’ (Scandinavians versus non-Scandinavians), age (old versus young), and number of people (less versus more). These characteristics are incommensurable, and it is precisely this incommensurability that remains hidden. This points to how an ill-structured and non-demarcated ‘diverse workforce’, or *anti-categorical representation*, thrives in the particular context that the DGW project acts in. If we define diversity as the number of employees, then workforce diversity is in fact increasing. If we define diversity by the increased intake of non-Scandinavians, then workforce diversity is also increasing at PharmaTech. If we define diversity as increased age dispersion, then the workforce is also becoming increasingly diverse. However, despite the fact that these all seem to make PharmaTech’s workforce increasingly diverse, this is not necessarily the case. Even though people tend to agree that the workforce is increasing, the opposite, that PharmaTech’s workforce is becoming less diverse could equally be stated, by pointing to other diversity characteristics. For example, the increased standardization of proficiencies and job titles can be said to make the workforce *less* diverse. Or the global employee branding initiative that seeks to accentuate ‘the generic PharmaTech employee’ as one who is healthy, high performing, respectful and humble can be said to attract certain like-minded, not diverse, kinds of employees. Whether the workforce is becoming more or less diverse becomes a battle of defining what ‘a diverse workforce’ means, thus pointing to many different localized understandings of the concept. This contradicts some of the central premises of the DGW project. While it is correct that the workforce is undergoing *changes*, these changes do not necessarily bring more or less diversity into the workforce. These changes are nonetheless *translated* into ‘increased diversity’, rather than ‘decreased diversity’, despite the latter being an equally legitimate argument. Arguably, it makes little sense to develop a novel approach to the ‘increasingly diverse workforce’, since the workforce is not per se becoming increasingly diverse.

Instead of adopting a predetermined conceptualization of workforce diversity as a concept able to increase/decrease, be managed, be included or excluded, I believe that practitioners would benefit from paying increased attention to the following question “*What are the consequences of different workforce diversity conceptualizations?*” Furthermore, I believe it to be key to reflect on this question prior to accepting the proposition that the organizational

workforce is becoming increasingly diverse. Instead of focusing on what to do with an increasingly diverse workforce, organizations should pay attention to how different representations construct different diversities within the workforce, and in particular how these diversities enable and constrain. In the following, I will, based on this argument, critically assess some central assumptions in much workforce diversity research.

### ***Implications for workforce diversity research***

The workforce diversity literature has shown the multitude of organizations that have been and are still driving diversity initiatives based on the assumptions that diversity is increasing or that diversity must be accommodated in better ways. In critique of this dominant view, agenda-setting critical diversity scholars have called for a context-sensitive reading of workforce diversity practices (Kalonaityte, 2010; Zanoni, 2010). However, this field of critical diversity studies holds its own problematic assumptions. For example, mainstream critical diversity research tends to show that “organizations actively construct disadvantaged and privileged identities and distribute resources in unequal fashion (e.g. Acker, 2006; Hearn and Collinson, 2006; Mirchandani and Butler, 2006)” (Kalonaityte, 2010, p. 35). As mentioned in Chapter 2, I subscribe to the idea of pursuing a context-sensitive reading of workforce diversity but also find the central focus on investigating and exposing oppression and privilege as problematic. This opinion is a result of my research position, in which I see both my own and the general role of the researcher as central to constructing the phenomena under investigation. In other words, if we as researchers wish to construct workforce diversity practices as oppressive and marginalizing, we can do so simply by using a particular lens when viewing the empirical setting and by making certain interpretations of the empirical material. It is my hope that a ‘context-sensitive reading’, assuming ‘context’ as a broad, unfixed and flexible concept, can allow for a plurality of ways to rethink workforce diversity beyond that of oppression only. These alternative readings put past constructions of workforce diversity in a different and more nuanced light, as we become aware of the many ways the phenomenon can be constructed.

In their review of the workforce diversity literature, Jonsen et al. (2011) argue that the field suffers from a lack of diverse approaches to the phenomenon, and in particular highlight that there is a lack of organizational-level analysis. While some context-sensitive studies have demonstrated how macro societal changes such as differences in regional cultures and national context affect workforce diversity (Boxenbaum, 2006; Omanovic, 2009; Ferner et al., 2005),

this dissertation diverges from these other studies by showing how ‘insignificant’ past or unrelated changes within the organization can have a great effect on the phenomenon. In doing this, I promote workforce diversity as an on-going, emergent, and changing phenomenon. Moreover, I promote workforce diversity as a phenomenon not only influenced by human and non-human actors, but also influenced by the *interactions* among these actors (for example, when the striving for economic resources simultaneously triggered top management’s attention to the DGW project). That is, human and non-human actors co-construct the phenomenon, and neither of these groups should be disregarded. Humans then do not hold the exclusive and central role in the production of workforce diversity.

Prior to the case presented here, few studies have, to my knowledge, shown how practitioners can consciously shift between categorical and anti-categorical representations as part of a planned strategic conceptualization of workforce diversity. It is my hope that this finding can contribute to a more nuanced perspective on the work done by practitioners. Moreover I put an emphasis on the importance of not only adopting a broad emic approach to workforce diversity to give rise to new categories, but also to study the shifting representations of workforce diversity more broadly. By opening up to such a context-sensitive reading of workforce diversity, researchers can adopt a more situated perspective on workforce diversity, rather than using a focus that prevailingly narrows in on diversity in a given workforce. In other words, it is not the differences among people (i.e. the demarcations drawn to delineate workforce diversity) that must claim sole centrality in diverse workforce research, but also how the notion is constructed through the way it is situated, presented and negotiated in a given context.

### **The problem of predetermined workforce diversity**

Promoting workforce diversity as emergent, changing, and assembled through a complex web of interactions among human and non-human actors holds the potential to allow unforeseen aspects of the phenomenon emerge and question important yet sometimes hidden assumptions within the broader workforce diversity literature. For example, let us consider some of the most widely cited studies addressing workforce diversity. In the book *Creating the Multicultural Organization*, Taylor Cox Jr. (Cox, 2001) starts off by providing a definition of diversity that is commonly seen in workforce diversity research:

[Workforce diversity] is the variation of social and cultural identities among people existing together in a defined employment or market setting. (Cox, 2001, p. 3)

This definition is broad and opens up an almost infinite set of identities and social categories to explore. However, despite this broad definition, Cox (2001) goes on to emphasize a set of specific social categories, namely gender, race, nationality, religion, age and work specialization (see for example Cox, 2001, p. 4, 84, 129). In his definition of workforce diversity, he points out that the term is not meant to be so broad as to mean *any* difference between people, nor so narrow as to mean differences between gender and race. But where do we draw the line then? Where in the spectrum between these two extremes does his definition lie? What is included and what is excluded from this definition? Along similar lines, Ditomaso et al. (2007) define workforce diversity as “the composition of work units in terms of the cultural or demographic characteristics that are salient and symbolically meaningful in the relationships among group members.” Carell and Mann (1993) note how precise definitions of workforce diversity remained elusive throughout the 1990s, and it is noteworthy that this problem still remains part of workforce diversity research today.

Despite elusive definitions of workforce diversity, the concept is simultaneously presented as a predetermined notion. For example, consider the statements that workforce diversity ‘might act as a performance barrier’, ‘might add value to the organization’ (Herring, 2009) or that good workforce diversity management’s biggest challenge is “an organizational culture that is somewhere between deadly and toxic when it comes to handling diversity” (Cox, 2001, p. 12). Along similar lines, Mor Barak points out how “today’s increasingly diverse workforce is among the most important global challenges faced by corporate leaders, human resource managers, and management consultants” (Barak, 2005, p. 2) and proceeds by stating that “homogenous societies [in terms of diversity] have become heterogeneous”, and that this trend is irreversible (Barak, 2005, p. 2). However, she also continues to discuss issues of workforce diversity in the context of gender, ethnicity, age, disability and sexuality (Barak, 2005, p. 3). She concludes the book by arguing that “[c]hanging the organization’s culture from merely ‘diversity tolerant’ or ‘respectful of diversity’ to *truly inclusive* can be done through deliberate actions” (Barak, 2005, p. 292). Considering the findings in this dissertation, I believe it is relevant to question these statements before looking for solutions to the problems they seek to solve. Can workforce diversity act? Can workforce diversity add value? Can you handle workforce diversity? Can you change a culture so that it is more inclusive towards diversity?

Based on the findings presented throughout this dissertation, we can now put the statements made by influential workforce diversity scholars in a different (and more critical) light. In this dissertation, we have witnessed how workforce diversity can act as an appearance-shifting, or as the title of this dissertation points to, a chameleonic phenomenon, able to accommodate the changing nature of the context in which it is situated. Taking this chameleonic behavior seriously has consequences for the way we understand the phenomenon. For example, counter-arguments that contradict the statements above can just as easily be constructed. Consider the reversed alternative to Mor Barak's statement: "Today's *decreasing* diverse workforce is among the most important global challenges." As argued in the previous section on 'practical implications', we could just as easily talk of a *decrease* in workforce diversity at PharmaTech. It is, however, not only within PharmaTech that this problem arises. If we adopt the broad definitions of workforce diversity used by many scholars within the field, there is no reason not to construct the phenomenon as decreasing. For example, today most white-collar workers share some fundamental premises for doing work, namely the use of specific operating systems (Windows or Apple OS X) – systems that align work, and therefore also align IT skills. Is the alignment of basic IT skills then pointing to a *decreasingly* diverse workforce? If the conceptualization of workforce diversity includes IT skills among employees, then yes. The central point I wish to make here is that it depends on the way you define workforce diversity. Arguing that workforces are becoming *decreasingly* diverse is just as easily justifiable as workforces becoming *increasingly* diverse. The point is that the statement around today's workforce becoming decreasingly/increasingly diverse or workforce diversity as a performance barrier/facilitator or value-adder or value-remover are simply unsubstantiated if we adopt an overly broad or overly vague definition of workforce diversity.

As an example of a skew towards an understanding of workforce diversity as increasing, rather than decreasing Williams and O'Reilly begin their review on forty years of research in diversity with the opening statement:

It is now accepted wisdom that a major challenge facing managers in the next century will be an increasingly diverse workforce. But what conclusions can be drawn from the research on demography and diversity about meeting this challenge? (Williams and O'Reilly, 1998, p. 77)

As another more contemporary example, the following table shows the differences in results from search queries in Google Scholar that portray workforce diversity as either ‘increasing’ or ‘decreasing’.

**Table 1:** Search queries in Google Scholar on the increase/decrease of workforce diversity (search query made on October 7<sup>th</sup> 2015 at <http://scholar.google.com>).

Search query on Google Scholar	Number of results
“ <b>increasing</b> workforce diversity”	527
“ <b>increase</b> in workforce diversity”	79
“ <b>decreasing</b> workforce diversity”	0
“ <b>decrease</b> in workforce diversity”	2

So why have so many scholars reproduced the argument that workforce diversity is increasing, rather than decreasing? The skew towards workforce diversity as a predetermined notion that increases, rather than decreases, informs us that despite broad definitions that incorporate a multitude of ways to conceptualize workforce diversity and social differences at large, it is conceptualizations that *verify an increase in workforce diversity* that are dominant within the literature. One reason for this dominant view may be that the literature carries the historical baggage of gender, race and class as focus points among the infinite socio-demographical categories that we can construct. While *Workforce 2000* is seen as a central contribution to the field – a contribution that accentuated socio-demographics of gender, class and race – it is also noteworthy that studies of the positions of specific socio-demographic groups in organizations date back to the 1970s (Zanoni et al., 2010). In these early studies, “scholars documented how inequality in organizations was structured along gender and racioethnic lines, and investigated the underlying mechanisms that produced it” (Zanoni et al., 2010, p. 10), thus possibly setting the scene for later agenda-setting publications forming the field workforce diversity.

## **Overcoming predetermined notions of workforce diversity**

So how can we overcome this central problematic, namely that the phenomenon ‘workforce diversity’ is largely predetermined? Let us consider two very different roads to follow. The first road is that workforce diversity researchers should move towards narrower definitions of workforce diversity, by zooming in on specific characteristics and only *then* putting forward statements that address these specific and localized situations. Here researchers should avoid broadening findings from concrete axes of intersections (for example, on age, generations and life situations at PharmaTech) to collective statements about workforce diversity at large. In these narrower research fields, it would be fair to put forward statements such as ‘the workforce is becoming increasingly diverse in terms of gender and race in the Scandinavian pharmaceutical industry’. However, trying to extrapolate these findings into statements about how ‘workforce diversity is becoming increasingly/decreasingly diverse’ would be erroneous. This could potentially lead to an increasingly fragmented field with little coherence, where overarching and predetermined statements about the phenomenon would be dropped.

The other road to follow is to think of workforce diversity research as representing a loosely-knit family of many approaches to the analysis of differences among humans in organizations. Along similar lines, theories such as ‘organization theory’ are “characterized by vagues, heterogeneity, claims and counterclaims” (Waldo, 1978). In such a view, ‘workforce diversity theory’ encapsulates a whole range of subfields, which might have little or nothing to do with each other. Here workforce diversity becomes a concept with boundary object capabilities in that it offers a sense of collectivity among scholars who are engaged in divergent subfields with little overlapping. Some might argue that this situation is already the case today. While this is somewhat true, there is still a dominant perception that workforce diversity is increasing, rather than decreasing. Unlike in workforce diversity research, it would stand out if an organization theory scholar put forward grand statements such as ‘the *increase* in organizing is one of today’s most important global challenges’.

While the examples above are from some highly cited publications within the field, they are not representative of the whole field of workforce diversity. However, they, along with the numbers in Table 1, do point to an important tendency that needs to be addressed if the field is to avoid being populated with broad statements about workforce diversity based on narrow and predetermined definitions of the concept. The problem, as I see it, is how some scholars tack back and forth between broad and narrow definitions of workforce diversity in their research. Here some scholars both adopt the idea of a broad theory with broad definitions of workforce

diversity that possibly encompass all differences among people in work related situations, while simultaneously putting forward statements that only fit in narrow definitions where diversity is treated as a predetermined notion – for example, as a concept that is able to ‘increase’. If we do not address this problem, workforce diversity research risks treading the same waters due to disagreements over whether workforce diversity creates value/profit/inclusiveness for organizations. In these disagreements, it is not a particular variety of workforce diversity that is more problematic than other varieties, but rather the debate itself that is problematic, as we risk overlooking the chameleonic characteristics that the phenomenon can have.

## **Epilogue: The aftermath of the DGW project**

As this dissertation is coming to an end, I want to briefly enlighten the reader on the peculiar aftermath at PharmaTech not long after the closing down of the DGW project. By the end of 2013, the Innovation Department Office was shut down and the Innovation Department Manager left his job at PharmaTech. About a year later, Cameron the Executive Vice President declined a transfer to a new position with reduced responsibilities. The general understanding was that being offered a position with reduced responsibilities at such a high level, in practice, meant that you were laid off. Two months later in January 2015, Gareth the Senior Vice President, was also laid off. In the preceding employee satisfaction survey, the global HRM division had received one of the lowest scores at PharmaTech. This survey clearly painted a picture of a workplace populated by dissatisfied employees. The departure and laying off of these individuals, and in particular, Cameron, was an unusual occurrence. Through my contacts at PharmaTech, I got an indication that this might happen in a not too distant future, but when it finally did happen it came as a shock to many. Moreover, the national media reacted very critically when one of the top business women in the country, and the only female Executive Vice President at PharmaTech, was laid off by a company promoting gender equality and in particular more females in top-management positions. While I do not believe that the DGW project was in any way the main cause of these occurrences, I got the impression early on that there was an unsatisfactory working climate in which some top managers were mostly concerned with the political struggles at the top levels of the organization rather than with issues at the lower levels.



As my PhD project was coming to an end, I was left with a range of unanswered questions. It seemed to me that the more I got to know of the project, the setting and the people at PharmaTech, the more elusive the case seemed, even as more questions started to come to mind. Did management intentionally hold back key information that otherwise might have benefited the DGW project team in developing the project? For example, what if management had included the DGW project team in the concrete aspects of the political situatedness of the project? While I have painted a somewhat critical picture of some of the work done by management, this is only one version of the story. It is noteworthy that in my dissertation I present accounts from several employees and Vice Presidents, but not from Gareth, the Senior Vice President, or Cameron, the Executive Vice President. On different occasions, and particularly in the later phases of my PhD, I aired my considerations about interviewing Gareth and Cameron. However, I was continuously encouraged 'not to go down that road'. Why did people not want me to talk to these two individuals? Looking back, I think that two circumstances played a role here. First, it was a common understanding that one does not engage with these individuals unless it is extremely important and you could end up getting 'burned' by wasting their time. They were important top management employees with little time on their hands. Second, what if during such an interview, I intentionally or by accident aired my version of the DGW project? Would it fit the versions of these individuals, or would it point to the discrepancies in the way they, and the employees below them, perceived the project? If such discrepancies came out, what would the consequences be?

Not being able to present the personal accounts of Gareth and Cameron is one of the things that I regret. Not too long after I aired my ambition to interview them, they had left the company. And so, although this dissertation presents a comprehensive account of the DGW project from beginning to end, it also paints a highly contextual and situated picture, which has been shaped by my ability to engage people, but also shaped by the limitations of not being able to access other relevant people.

Having said this, I also want to pay my respect to the people I have met during my work at PharmaTech. I particularly want to thank those involved in the DGW project for giving me such broad and almost unconditional access to their insights. Generally, I have witnessed high professional standards and sharply executed work. Also on a general note, I see it as a sign of a healthy, well-driven and explorative company, in that PharmaTech gives room and provides substantial funds for projects such as the DGW project – projects that are of a more abstract and

explorative nature than most other projects at the company. I believe that the mere presence of these projects shows a willingness to engage in an organizational conversation about how to make PharmaTech a great place to work. Becoming and staying a great place to work requires continuous debate about the challenges faced when the workforce is growing globally. It is perhaps not a coincidence that the company is not only rated as one of the nation's best places to work, but also one of the world's top 100 best companies to work for by Fortune Magazine.

## CHAPTER 8: REFERENCES

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# CHAPTER 9: APPENDICES

## **Appendix 1: DGW project interview questions (early phases)**

Generally remember to ask, "**Can you explore that with other words?**" (Alvesson, 2003) when interviewees use standard jargon, as this may trigger responses less constrained by script-coherent expressions.

Some questions below are inspired by Özbilgin and Tatli (2008, p. 432) – these are marked by ‘#question number’. Also, the questions are not necessarily meant to be asked in consecutive order, but can be asked according to the way the interview conversation evolves.

### **Personal info**

1. What is your role in relation to the DGW project?
2. What is your background?
3. How old are you?
4. How did you and the other team members get involved in the project? (Trevor, Luke and Leia)

### **The DGW more broadly**

5. Have there been any important changes during the development of the DGW? If so, which ones?

### **Dynamics of segmentation and naming of scenarios**

6. What are the reasons for the change of terminology in the Me Inc. / People Connect scenario?
7. How do you come up with labels / terminology for categories of the workforce (e.g. the labels you use in the scenarios)?
8. What do you believe are the biggest challenges when categorizing / segmenting the workforce?
9. What do you believe are the biggest opportunities when categorizing / segmenting the workforce?
10. Are there any other fundamental ways to address the workforce segmentation you choose not to address? If so, which?

11. How do you find a balance between the use of an overly simple workforce segmentation and an overly detailed / complex workforce segmentation?
12. Are you seeking consensus among your stakeholders when creating your segmentation framework?
  - a. If so, how do you seek consensus?
  - b. If so, why do you seek consensus?
13. Have certain groups of people (e.g. professions, nationalities, generations, etc.) been favored in the organization during the project development? If so, which groups of people?
14. Are certain personalities favored in the organization? If so, which types?
15. What affects your decision to focus on some employee characteristics while not focusing on others in your segmentation of the workforce?

#### **Age, generations, life situations and career models**

16. How would you describe the different ways of segmenting the workforce? (#10)
17. What are the reasons for choosing to focus on:
  - c. age?
  - d. generations?
  - e. life situations?
  - f. demographics?
  - g. career models?
18. Which workforce categories work well and which ones work less well?
  - a. Age? (In which context does it work well?)
  - b. Demographics? (In which context does it work well?)
  - c. Generations? (In which context does it work well?)
  - d. Life stages? (In which context does it work well?)

#### **Changes in terminology**

19. What made you change life *stages* to life *situations*?
20. How did the change in terminology from *stages* to *situations* affect your conception of these stages / situations?
21. What made you change the scenario name from Me Inc. to People Connect?
22. What made you change the scenario name from People Connect to Me Connect?



23. How did the change in terminology from Me Inc. to Me Connection affect your conception of the scenario?
24. Are there any differences in the way the employees in the CoE Workshops have felt about generations and life situations? If so, what differences? If so, what do you think is the reason for this difference?
25. How did the CoE employees react to your segmentation into *generations*?
26. How did the CoE employees react to your segmentation into *life situations*?
27. Does it seem like people tend to like some segmentation models over others (e.g. a preference for either age, generations, life situations or career models)?
28. How do you believe people feel about being segmented into generations versus into life situations?
29. How do you believe people feel about being categorized into workforce segments?

#### **The SC-model**

30. What does the SC-model show?
31. How does the SC-model in your opinion relate to *Standardization* and *Customization*?
32. Are there any preferences for either standardization or customization in:
  - h. Executive Management?
  - i. Middle managers?
  - j. Non-managers (employees on the floor)?
  - k. Employees generally?

#### **The strategy development in a global organizational context**

33. Why do you segment the workforce?
34. Can you imagine not segmenting your workforce in the development of the DGW? If so, how would you approach this?
35. How does the workforce segmentation relate to the overall corporate objectives and strategies? (#11)
36. Do you believe that there is a specific culture at PharmaTech? If so, how would you describe it?
37. How does workforce segmentation relate to a PharmaTech culture? (#11)
38. How are employees involved in the design of workforce segmentation efforts? (#14)
39. How have different groups of employees reacted to the DGW project? (#15)

40. Would some employees be more reluctant to engage in the project findings and others more embracive of the findings? If so, whom and why?
41. How is the project's workforce segmentation evaluated / monitored? (#16)
42. What are the benefits, if any, of workforce segmentation? (#18)
43. What are the disadvantages, if any, of workforce segmentation?
44. Do you have any examples of fortunate or unfortunate workforce segmentation? If so, please describe these.
45. Does the organization offer any training on workforce segmentation? (#26)
46. Are there any pitfalls of workforce segmentation? If so, does it seem like the organization is aware of these pitfalls?
47. In summary, how would you define the current state of the organization in regards to creating effective / inclusive workforce segmentation? (#27)
48. How would you describe your responsibility in putting a focus on the consequences of workforce segmentation?
49. Do you stay open to new ways of segmenting the workforce? If so, how do you stay open?
50. Considering your experience, what would be your recommendations to others addressing workforce segmentation strategically?
51. What do you believe will be the challenges when the DGW project findings are to be adapted to fit line managers?
52. How is the DGW a success in your opinion?
53. Are there any conflicts of interest between the way you want the DGW project to evolve and the way others want it to evolve (e.g. top management, CoE's, etc.)?
54. Could you imagine a strategic project such as DGW, where workforce categories were less important? E.g. a project that consciously avoided putting people into categories?
55. What are the challenges of strategically simplifying the complexity within the organization in a project such as the DGW project?

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– a Field Study of the Rise and Fall of a Bottom-Up Process

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En systemteoretisk analyse af moderniseringen af et amtskommunalt sundhedsvæsen 1980-2000*
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