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Diversity management in a sample of South African companies

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An interview schedule was used to test the applicability of the Cox model of diversity management in a sample of South African companies. Even though this sample acknowledges the potential advantages of diversity, they do not yet experience a pressing need to optimise diversity in their workforce. This sample can be classified mainly as monolithic companies, although some evidence emerged that specific companies are developing a plural orientation. The applicability of an American model in a South African setting is discussed.

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Introduction

The aims of this study are to (a) explore a model on the management of diversity (Cox, 1991; 1993); (b) describe the development and implementation of an interview schedule to test the applicability of the Cox model of diversity management in a sample of South African companies; (c) use content-analysis to draw conclusions about the management of diversity in the sample; and (d) comment on the applicability of the American model in a South African setting.

As the trend to globalise many domestic companies increase and multinational companies penetrate more domestic markets, managers of one country come into contact with different ideas about managing their human resources. In addition within each domestic company the importance of cross-functional teams, which can imply a diverse membership base, as a basis for competitive advantage is being emphasised. On a societal level workforces are becoming more diverse regarding gender, nationality, age, religious beliefs and physical ability giving impetus to research on how to manage this diversity.

The research question and management issue in this study was whether a theoretical model developed in a different country could be operationalised and tested within the South African context.

Definitions of diversity

Some of the concepts central to the understanding of the model are 'multiculturalism', 'diversity' and 'managing diversity'.

The term *diversity* is often used as synonym for *multiculturalism* and the latter concept introduces yet another set of relevant terms, for example Euro-, Afro- or 'multiple-centrist, pluralism or particularism or universalism, separatism versus relativism' (Asante, 1992: 182, see also Ravitch, 1992: 82). The importance of uniform terminology is obvious in the conclusion regarding the debate between Ravitch

and Asante: they 'agree that their different perspectives [regarding multiculturalism] reflect very different and incompatible visions of the future of the United States' (Bonevac, 1992: 138). For the purpose of this study regarding the term *multiculturalism*, it suffices to say that people operate in specific social structures which are not homogeneous wholes, but rather composed of multiple communities or cultures (Parekh, 1992: 44). O'Mara distinguishes between diversity and multiculturalism in the following way:

'Multiculturalism refers to many cultures. In diversity work, it means valuing the differences of others and creating an environment that does not require assimilation (taking on the traits of another culture, leaving the culture of origin behind)' (1994: 118).

In most countries *diversity* is defined as

'race, gender, age, language, physical characteristics, disability, sexual orientation, economic status, parental status, education, geographic origin, profession, lifestyle, religion, position in the company hierarchy, and any other difference' (O'Mara, 1994: 115).

Cox (1993: 6) defines *cultural diversity* as 'the representation, in one social system, of people with distinctly different group affiliations of cultural significance'. Gardenswartz & Rowe (1993: 92) and Este, Griffin & Hirsch (1995) make a distinction between primary dimensions (e.g. race, gender, physical ability, sexual orientation) and secondary dimensions (e.g. marital status, religious beliefs, work experience) of diversity. A person becomes part of a particular group due to the fact that he/she shares certain characteristics which the group has in common, thus a group identity is established.

Cox (1993) acknowledges that there are several kinds of identity groups, but includes only racio-ethnicity, gender and nationality and argues that the effects of cultural diversity on individual and organisational outcomes are due to both the physical and cultural identities of organisational members.

The concept, *managing diversity*, is described as 'planning and implementing organisational systems and practices to manage people so that potential advantages of diversity are maximised while its potential disadvantages are minimised ... with the goal of maximising the ability of all employees to contribute to organisational goals and to achieve their full potential unhindered by group identities such as gender, race, nationality, age and departmental affiliation' (Cox, 1993: 11).

Cox's model, presented in Figure 1 and described in the next section, is one of the many approaches to diversity and proposes that the *impact of diversity on organisational outcomes is a complex interaction between individuals and their environment which includes intergroup as well as organisational forces*. Human (1991:8) argues that it seems impossible for organisations to manage their cultural diversity in a corporate fashion, but that it rather has to be managed by people in their mutual interactions.

A diversity climate

The effects of a person's group affiliations (race, gender, ethnicity and nationality specifically) can be analysed on the individual, group and organisational levels (see also Griggs & Louw, 1994; Christie, Lessem & Mbige, 1993).

Individual-level factors

1. Personal identity structures: a person can be influenced by specific identity groups. Motsabi (in Human, 1991: 120) notes that one of the core problems in South African organisations is that the business culture is too narrowly Westcentric and many Blacks continue to

experience it as alienating and will remain marginalized.

2. Prejudice: a person can experience prejudice on a societal level and this can be reinforced in a workplace through actions such as racial or sexual harassment (see also Kendall, in Griggs *et al.*, 1994; or Koopman in Christie *et al.*, 1993).
3. Stereotyping: members of certain identity groups may be hindered to gain entrance into organisations, or after joining may experience status incongruence, lack of career mobility, or differing development programmes.
4. Personality type: the authoritarian personality may be more prone towards prejudice and discrimination and may react with cynicism towards others in the work place.

Intergroup-level factors

1. Cultural differences: identity groups may differ on dimensions such as time or on individualism or collectivism. Such differences may be disruptive or may enhance the achievement of work teams. Gonzalez and Payne (in Griggs *et al.*, 1994) use the concept of 'diversity teams' to caution that vehicles for building a work team should be consistent with the national culture and needs of the work group.
2. Ethnocentrism: the beliefs, behaviours and values of one's own group are evaluated more positively than those of out-groups (Cox, 1993; Koopman in Christie *et al.*, 1993) and this can contribute to a negative climate in a company.
3. Intergroup conflict: Cox (1993: 137) notes that sources of conflict in the workplace relating to diversity include

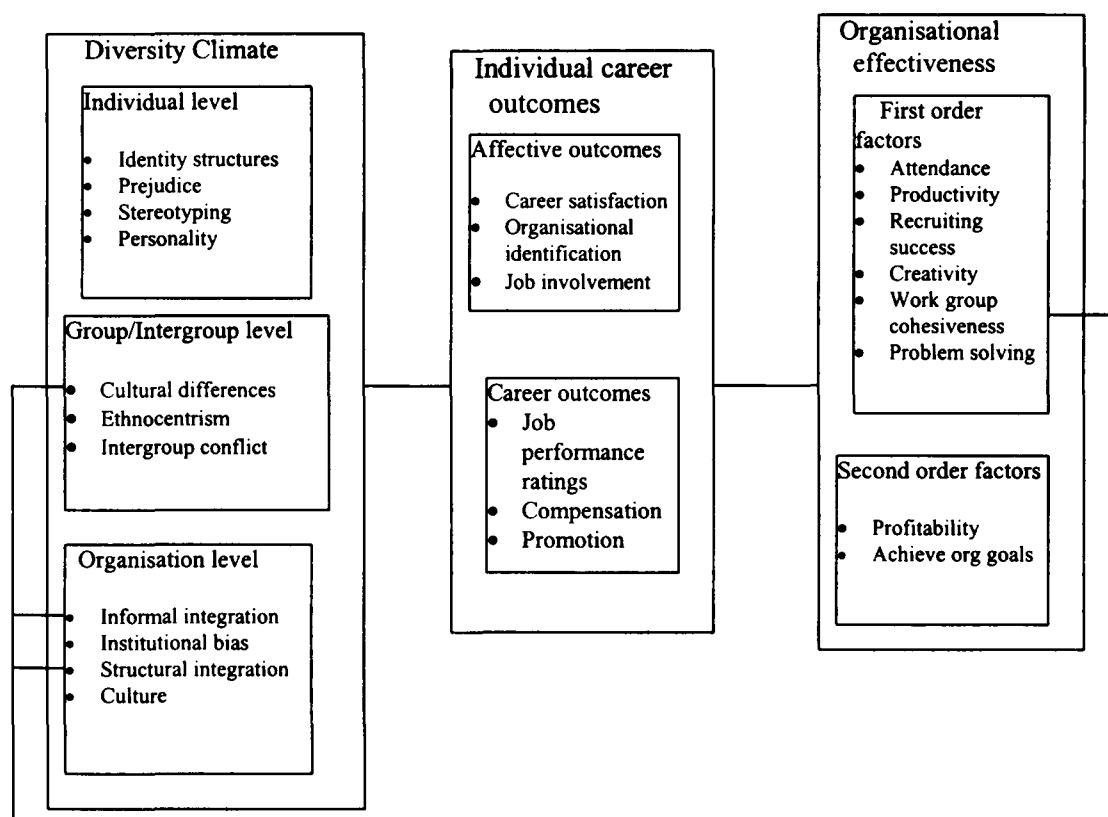


Figure 1 Cox model (1991; 1993) of organisational effectiveness

power discrepancies and forced assimilation with the dominant group as opposed to the preservation of the own identities. Thomas (in Griggs *et al.*, 1993: 136) presents a 'cultural rapport' model designed to transcend the complications of cross-cultural, intercultural and intracultural communication within a diverse workforce.

Organisational context factors

1. Organisational culture: *culture strength* – indicates the extent to which norms and values are clearly defined and the extent to which they are accepted by all groups within the company (Cox, 1993: 162). Low enforcement (weak culture) allows the dominant group to invoke their own culture. *Content* – the specific values, norms and expected behaviours are communicated to members by means of socialisation to align the individual to the norms of the company (Cox, 1993: 165).
2. Acculturation process: a typology of acculturation alternatives suggest four modes namely assimilation, separation, deculturation or pluralism (Cox, 1993: 166). On the one pole of the continuum, *assimilation*, the dominant organisation culture becomes the standard of behaviour for all other cultures merging into the organisation, to eliminate the expression of different cultures at work. At the opposite pole is *pluralism*, a two-way adaptation process in which both the organisation and entering members change to some extent to reflect the norms and values of the other so that interdependence and mutual appreciation are emphasised.
3. Structural integration: the levels of heterogeneity is measured by (a) an overall employment profile providing the representation of various culture groups in the total work force and (b) participation in the power structure analysed by for example promotion potential and analysis of significant group decision-making bodies.
4. Informal integration: informal groups in organisations influence an individual's career success (Cox, 1993: 195) as it includes access to social networks and mentorship programmes.
5. Institutional bias: some management practices often unintentionally create barriers to full participation of out-group members for example the practice of having meetings during periods which fall outside working

hours create problems for employees who have school age children or make use of public transport.

Individual career outcomes

The individual's career expectations and outcomes may be influenced by the diversity climate to create: (a) affective outcomes – perception of employees of their employer and the company and includes measures of employee morale and satisfaction; and (b) actual career achievements – measures taken at an individual level including his/her job performance ratings, vertical or horizontal mobility rates and compensation history.

Organisational effectiveness

The individual outcomes impact upon a number of organisational effectiveness criteria. First order effectiveness criteria include measurements such as absenteeism, personnel productivity, quality of work-life surveys. Second order effectiveness criteria include calculation of market share and profitability indices and the extent to which formal organisational goals are achieved. The challenge facing companies is therefore to create a diversity climate conducive to positive career outcomes for individual members in order to achieve organisational effectiveness and competitiveness.

Applications of the model

Researchers tend to agree on the basic organisational forms that are relevant in the transformation process towards greater diversity. Adler (1991: 104) refers to the progression from parochial organisations, to ethnocentric and finally to synergistic organisations. Gardenswartz *et al.* (1993: 249) as well as Esty *et al.* (1995: 189) use models in which a company moves from being a **monocultural** to a **multicultural** organisation by following a series of steps. Cox (1993: 226, see Table 1) describes monolithic, plural and multicultural organisations (those companies that achieve the objective of managing diversity).

Method

Interview schedule

As part of the 1994 MBA course *International and cross-cultural management* at the Graduate Business School of the University of Pretoria, a study group developed an

Table 1 Relationship between organisational form and dimensions of the diversity climate (Cox, 1991)

Dimension	Organisational form		
	Monolithic	Plural	Multi-cultural
1. Culture	Ignores or actively discourages diversity	Ignores or tolerates diversity	Values diversity
2. Acculturation	Assimilation	Assimilation	Pluralism
3. Degree of structural integration	Minimal	Partial	Full
4. Degree of informal integration	Minimal	Limited	Full
5. Institutional bias in HR systems	Omnipresent	Prevalent	Minimised or eliminated
6. Intergroup conflict	Minimal, due to identity homogeneity	Significant	Minimised by management attention

interview schedule based on the Cox model. The applicability of the model was tested by interviewing three companies (consulting engineering practice; game park; retailer) and a final interview schedule was developed by Sparrow (available from authors).

The MBA class of 1995 had the assignment to apply Cox's model of multicultural management to South African companies by using the interview schedule. The reports were analysed during 1996 by the authors.

Sample

The students chose the companies: explosives manufacturer; cement manufacturer; cosmetics manufacturer; consulting engineering company (major); consulting engineering company (two minor); major research institution; information technology company; cosmetics importer and distributor; high technology research company; homeopathic company; steel manufacturer; tile manufacturer; two banking institutions; chemical manufacturer, State Departments (three); Telkom – three different divisions; small steel manufacturer; university and retailer. The 25 organisations represent a relatively wide coverage of public sector and private sector companies in the Gauteng province, is a sample of convenience and results obtained provide a generalised indication of the implementation of diversity management in this sample.

Companies have been numbered arbitrarily during the coding process to comply with the confidentiality principle.

Procedures

Survey methodology

The steps followed by the MBA's in doing the survey were as follows: (a) identify the company to be researched and contract to interview the human resources director; (b) acquire the necessary information to complete the interview schedule; (c) classify and interpret the information; and (d) prepare the final report.

Codification of results

A brief overview of the procedure, using content-analysis that was followed in analysing and codifying the reports, is as follows:

1. Each data set (report) was given an arbitrary number.
2. As the individual datasets have no statistical elements but contain narrative descriptions of the survey themes, it was decided to construct a frame of reference with which each individual data set could be analysed. As Sparrow's survey and the model were the common factors in all the studies, the elements covered in the report were transformed into variables. The result was a list of variables (codes) which was used to analyse (codify) individual datasets. The completed codification form is available from the authors.
3. Depending on the nature of each variable, a scale (either yes/no or 1 to 5) was developed for that variable. A specific data set's response or coverage regarding a specific code was established by attaching a value to the degree to which the code was covered. An initial independent pilot test regarding codification was done by the second author. The first author then codified the current data

set. Further guidance was provided by statistical consultants during the codification process of the current data set.

4. The results of the evaluation were recorded on an integrated format (see graphs available from the authors).
5. General statistical techniques were applied to establish trends and aggregate levels that will be presented in the next section.

Glass, McGaw & Smith (1981) identify meta-analysis as a highly technical quantitative process which aims to apply statistical procedures to existing empirical research studies. However, the individual reports are not empirical studies – MBA students put forward interpretations in the form of narrative reports. Content analysis was adopted by using the codification process to integrate the results of the individual studies.

Results

The results obtained from the analysis is reported in two stages, firstly on a micro-level where one or a number of thematically related variables are presented in sections according to the Cox model and secondly general trends in the sample are identified.

Micro-level: variable analyses

Diversity as competitive advantage

The relevant questions in this section of the interview schedule were: (a) to what extent do you feel that there is value in managing diversity; and (b) to what extent does the dominant culture value managing diversity? All graphs available from the authors show the notations in the text and the footnote.

The frequency distribution on the first question shows that most respondents ($sd=1.2$) do believe that managing diversity has value ($x^2=3.5/5$). This finding contrasts with the corresponding figures on the second question indicating the extent to which the *dominant* culture values managing diversity ($x=2.25/5$, $sd=1.4$): the number of respondents is fewer, the average is lower and the distribution is wider.

Two further questions were asked in this section namely: does your company realise each of the potential advantages of diversity, and a fourth question as to whether the company exploits the advantages. The list of advantages were: cost; resource acquisition; marketing; creativity; problem solving; systems flexibility. The scale employed was dichotomous: Yes (1) or No (0).

The difference between the extent to which companies realise the advantage ($x=0.77/1$, $sd=0.03$) but fail to exploit those advantages ($x=0.11/1$, $sd=0.26$) is clear from the analysis. Only the *marketing* advantage is being exploited by companies.

Dimensions of integration

Acculturation

Two questions are included in this section: (a) do you feel there is a dominant culture in your company; and (b) to what extent has dominant or minority culture members adopted each other's culture? The respondents indicated whether the minority group or the majority had to adopt the

other's culture; or whether both groups had to change to some degree or whether neither changed to any extent.

On the first question all the respondents experienced a dominant culture ($sd=0$).

Responses to the second question indicated that 50% of the respondents felt that the minority had to adopt the culture of the dominant group, 12% saw that both groups had adopted some norms of the other and 20% stated that there was no adoption from any side.

Structural integration

Respondents were asked to what extent they believed that bastions or cliques of the dominant culture exist in their company.

The frequency distribution shows that most respondents feel that these cliques exist to a large extent ($x=3.88/5$, $sd=1.4$).

Informal integration

This section dealt with participation in informal activities such as dinners, social meetings, mentorships and sports activities: (a) to what extent are minorities physically involved in informal activities; (b) to what extent are these efforts sincere; and (c) to what extent are these efforts sufficient?

The combined frequency distributions indicated that on the first question minorities are practically not included ($x=1.86/5$, $sd=1.09$). On the second question an average response ($x=2.77/5$) with a slight deviation ($sd=1.29$) indicates a feeling that these efforts are not really sincere. Respondents mention that a possible reason for this is that invitations are usually sent out company wide, resulting in an apathetic attitude towards these functions and feel that no specific effort is being made to convince minorities that it is a sincere effort to socialise. Thirdly most of the respondents feel that these efforts are not sufficient.

The low response rate factor of 14 respondents (out of 25) for these variables indicates that this dimension does not receive much attention.

Cultural bias – prejudice

Respondents were asked (a) to what extent have you experienced negative attitudes towards yourself or other minorities and (b) to what extent do you feel prejudice exists within the firm against minorities in general?

Once again the low response rate frequency has relevance. The impact of who the respondent is (black/white/male/female), comes to light in this item. Most respondents were white males and only eleven responded to the first question. Those who did respond are experiencing a large degree of prejudice ($x=3.2/5$, small $sd=1.6$).

In contrast, 21 respondents reacted to the second question when they expressed the perception that a large degree of prejudice (3.59 out of a maximum score of five) exists within their companies.

Cultural bias – discrimination

The questions were (a) can you recall any instances of discrimination (Yes or No), (b) is there any form of institutional discrimination (Yes or No) and (c) to what extent

does your organisation discriminate inadvertently (on a scale of 1 to 5.)

Regarding the first question most respondents (57%) could recall instances of discrimination, either personally or as witnesses. On the second question the majority of respondents (80%) asserted that institutional discrimination exists in companies, either through policies or covertly for example in the form of biased selection committees. The frequency distribution drawn with reference to inadvertent discrimination in companies show that respondents feel that a high degree ($x = 3.9$, $sd = 1.2$) is present. This finding reflects on the way companies (subconsciously) remain insensitive to changing needs of company employees.

Cultural bias – intergroup conflict

Respondents were asked to what extent (a) have they noticed or experienced friction, tension or power struggles between groups and (b) have they witnessed a backlash to Affirmative Action (AA) or Equal Employment Opportunities (EEO) by the dominant group.

The response is once again dependent on who the respondent is. In this case, the result is that there is a low degree ($x=2.27$, $sd=1.3$) of noticeable friction or conflict. There is however a substantial backlash ($x=3$, $sd=1.7$) by dominant group members against AA or EEO programmes.

Tools for organisation change

Respondents were shown the relevant tables from the Cox & Blake (1991) model and indicated which tools for creating a multicultural organisation exist in their company.

The following results were obtained regarding the use of tools: (a) a low use of pluralism ($x=2$, $sd=0.9$); full structural integration ($x=1.9$, $sd=0.9$); integration in informal networks ($x=2.1$, $sd=1.23$); activities increasing organisation identification ($x=2.07$, $sd=1.22$); and activities resolving intergroup conflict ($x=2.06$, $sd=0.93$). Activities removing cultural bias shows the lowest use ($x=1.87$, $sd=1.05$).

The most obvious trend is that the distribution is skewed heavily to the right implying that the tools available to make companies more multicultural are not being used. Especially pluralism, full structural integration and cultural bias reduction are the tools least used – these three variables are viewed as the three core pillars of 'multiculturalising' companies.

Key-components for transition to multicultural organisations

Leadership

Respondents indicated to what extent the different levels of management supported the 'multiculturalising' effort.

Respondents believed that senior management showed above average support ($x=3.19$, $sd=1.6$), chief executive officers and line managers showed average support ($x=2.33$, $sd=0.2$ and $x=2.5$, $sd=1.6$ respectively), whereas supervisors gave below average support ($x=2.2$, $sd=1.7$).

When looking at the results holistically, a comparison of the mean responses provides the following trends: (a) CEO's are not showing the highest level of support and their support can be compared to the level of support from

supervisors; (b) senior management are the people driving the effort to become more multicultural and are supported to some extent by line managers; and (c) at the lowest level of contribution on the way to becoming multicultural are the supervisors. Several factors could cause this reaction such as a low level of education or demoralisation due to lack of own career opportunities.

The low aggregate level (mean of individual x 's = 2.59) is disturbing as it is important that leaders exert effort and show commitment to bring about radical attitudinal changes to make organisations more multicultural.

Training

The questions were: (a) to what extent is training in managing diversity done; and (b) if it is done, to what extent is it ongoing?

Once again the results are skewed heavily to the right which means that training is not done ($x=1.4/5$), neither is that which is given, ongoing ($x=1.733$).

The direct implication of giving no training is that existing structures, stereotypes and biases are never challenged or given the opportunity to adapt to new view points.

Research, culture assessment and follow-up

This section included three questions namely (a) to what extent is information collected about diversity issues; (b) has a comprehensive analysis of human resource systems been undertaken; and (c) if diversity is managed, to what extent are changes monitored and evaluated?

The same heavily skewed distribution was evident for all three above factors and the results are that in effect no research is being done ($x=1.8$, $sd=1.22$); no cultural and management audits have been done ($x=0.31/1$) and virtually no follow-up actions are launched ($x=1.57$, $sd=1.22$).

Discussion of results: general trends

Dimension 1: diversity as competitive advantage

The first section indicates a tendency for the human resource managers to believe in the principle of, as well as the potential advantages of managing diversity. The dominant cultural group in the company does not necessarily value the management of diversity. There is furthermore a discrepancy between this underlying belief and the extent to which these principles are being implemented and exploited with a focus only on the marketing advantage.

Dimension 2: dimensions of integration

Due to the existence of a strong, dominant culture group in all the companies of the study (a) minorities have had to adopt the culture of the dominant group; (b) cliques of the dominant group exist; (c) unconvincing efforts are made to integrate minorities in informal activities; (d) prejudice and discrimination are being witnessed or experienced, whether directly or inadvertently; and (e) intergroup conflict is present. The dominant culture group correlates with the demographic analysis obtained from most of the respondent companies (available from authors).

The main trends arising from this analysis are as follows: (a) whites constitute 61% of the total workforce of these companies, in comparison with the 19% of the 1991 South

African census figure; and (b) the figure for males working in these companies correlate with the census figure (51% versus 50% respectively). What both these figures do not show, is the uneven representation of males and females on different organisational levels. These two trends are typical of the South African environment as it is symptomatic of the existence of a dominant elite (white males) which either consciously or subconsciously disregard or overlook the needs and aspirations of minorities.

This dimension (structural integration) is the criterion to establish the degree to which companies are working towards a diverse workforce. In South Africa *diverse* reads 'multiracial' or the degree to which companies are imposing affirmative action programmes based on quotas. The danger, as deduced from the point of view that affirmative action is but the first step towards creating a multicultural workforce where everyone has equal opportunities to acquire quality of life, is that the integration criterion is over-emphasised to the detriment of its place in the context of a multicultural process.

This sample of companies can be classified mainly as monolithic companies (see Table 1), although some evidence emerged that specific companies are developing a plural orientation.

Dimension 3: tools for organisational change

Cox identified a number of ways ('tools') which can be used to create a multicultural organisation. The result of using these tools is that a company progresses on the road to creating a multicultural workforce as the subelements of the *integration dimension* are being realised. Because there are no indications that the respondent companies are in any significant way integrating diverse subgroups into their organisations, they are not applying any of these tools.

Dimension 4: key-components for transition to multicultural organisations

The respondent companies are indifferent about the key components that are required to move from monocultural to multicultural companies. Regarding *leadership* it is senior management, not the CEOs, who are initiating the process leading to diversity. Senior management does not however have the full, unequivocal support of their line managers or even of the supervisors. Training, research, follow-up and culture audits are almost totally disregarded as strategies. These companies need a more solid base in their human resource management systems and attitudes to ease the transition to multicultural enterprises.

Comments on diversity management

Human (1991), Christie, Lessem & Mbigi (1993), Cox (1993: 230) and Griggs & Louw (1994) describe comprehensive organisation development strategies that are designed to improve an organisation's capability in managing diverse workforces. Many of these authors agree on generic change strategies that consist of various components but caution that a tailor-made organisation development intervention should be evolved for each company.

The further research and implementation question is the applicability of American models in a Southern African

setting. One of the key problems in doing cross-cultural research is the operationalising of constructs in different cultures. It manifests itself for example when questionnaires are being translated from one source language into another target language. During the interviews for this study some of the American terms used by Cox in the models that the respondents were shown, had to be explained. This confirms the 'lack of semantic equivalence across languages' identified by Behling & McFillen (1997).

A further issue in cross-cultural research is a lack of conceptual equivalence across cultures (Behling *et al.*, 1997). The concept of diversity was in most cases interpreted as a variation of Affirmative Action or Equal Employment Opportunities. As both these concepts were not embodied in South African law at that stage, there were different interpretations given to such concepts. In other cases there was an attempt to link diversity management to certain perspectives on African management as described by Christie *et al.* (1993). A further example of the problem with conceptual equivalence is Louw's (in Griggs *et al.*, 1994: 177) argument that although the *ubuntu change process* can be described in six seemingly linear steps such a model should merely be seen as a device and the fundamental philosophy should not be trivialised. The idea that *ubuntu* is not a concept that lends itself to the kind of deconstruction system of analysis that is a cornerstone of Western thinking is supported by Koopman (1994) and Christie *et al.* (1993).

Another reaction by the respondents in this study was the reasons given during the interview and in the case studies about why the South African companies do not use the tools for change as described by Cox (1993). These reasons indicated that South African companies had their own set of norms or conventions about strategies for organisational change. For example some companies are wary of the South African stereotype reduction workshops (see Louw-Potgieter, Kamfer & Boy, 1991) or strategies used by their American counterparts (see Griggs *et al.*, 1994).

The reaction of the South African managers in this study highlights some of the earlier comments by Human (1991: 321-322) that if some of the negative expectations of managers and the effect of these expectations on the performance of subordinates are not addressed, then managing diversity programmes will have no more impact than 'black advancement' programmes. She argues that many managers have a healthy respect for the various cultures in South Africa, but that this does not preclude them from judging subordinates as individuals and identifying areas of strength. Furthermore, South African managers should not move too quickly to the seemingly less threatening process of managing diversity but should confront the vestiges of racism and sexism in their companies. In a recent article she concludes

'More sophisticated managing diversity programmes tend to argue that managing diversity training should not only (or necessarily) concern "managing them out there" but rather "me, in here". Indeed a welcome trend overseas is a concentration on a developmental model of intercultural sensitivity which

focuses on stages of personal growth' (Human, 1997: 29).

Notes

1. sd to be used to indicate sample standard deviation.
2. \bar{x} to be used to indicate sample average.
3. 3.5/5 = average of 3.5 out of a possible scale maximum of 5. An alternative elsewhere is e.g. 0.77/1 where one will be the maximum scale value.

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