

## (RE)PRESENTATIONS OF GENDER AND ETHNICITY IN DIVERSITY STATEMENTS ON EUROPEAN COMPANY WEBSITES

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### ABSTRACT

This paper investigates how specific notions of gender and ethnicity are integrated into diversity discourses presented on 241 top European company websites. Large European companies increasingly disclose equality and diversity policies in statements on websites. Such statements may be used to promote an ethical image of the company in terms of how well it manages diversity and guards against discrimination. In this paper we argue that diversity statement discourses are important as they play a key part in socially constructing how diversity should be regarded in the company by minority and majority groups, as well as indicating corporate values to external stakeholders (investors, government, community, press etc.). Sometimes, the notions of gender or ethnic diversity are positioned as a liability in need of protection, whilst in others, as a source of competitive advantage. We find evidence of use of discursive tools such as problematisation, rationalisation, fixation, reframing and naturalisation of the notions of gender and ethnic diversity, reinforced by use of symbols, such as statistics, photographs, membership badges and awards. Few statements directly associate gender and ethnic diversity with enhanced corporate performance. We found that diversity statements sometimes appear to be reinforce existing business stereotypes of women and people from ethnic minorities, and in a few discourses, create new ones, particularly evident in photographs illustrating the diversity web pages.

**Key words: Diversity, Gender, Ethnicity, Discourse, Corporate Websites, Europe**

### Introduction

Corporate websites provide a useful means of communicating corporate values and policies, and recently many large companies have started to include "diversity statements" on their websites. They are akin to mission statements, and are increasingly used as "window-dressing" to highlight the employer's good corporate social citizenship and ethical management practices (Winter, Saunders and Hart, 2003). They may be viewed as artefacts that reveal information about the corporate culture and play a dynamic

role in the realisation of values (Hatch, 1993). Diversity statements are important because of their role in the social construction of diversity, through their discourses helping to shape how differences are to be considered, valued and managed in companies and the business world. Apart from Kirby and Harter (2003) and Bellard and Ruling (2001), there are very few studies of the use of diversity discourses in the new medium of the internet, which is of increasing importance for stakeholders to gather knowledge and for companies to disseminate information. Diversity issues in Europe have

gained much publicity over the last two years, with increased pressure from governments and the European Commission (EC, 2004) for discrimination to be tackled. Point and Singh (2003) highlighted the increasing trend for European companies to promote diversity on websites, and noted that of the 27 diversity dimensions mentioned in diversity statements, gender and ethnicity were the most frequently cited, usually in a long list of anti-discrimination policy dimensions.

The aim of this paper is to unravel the specific notions of gender and ethnicity promoted by companies in web-based 'diversity statements' to see how they are positioned within the managing diversity discourses. The specific aim of our analysis is to uncover the micro-level discursive practices that form part of the social construction of diversity, in particular gender and ethnic diversity. The paper is structured as follows: first we consider the social construction of gender and ethnicity, and then the role of diversity discourses in that process. We review the few existing empirical studies of diversity discourses. Critical discourse analysis focuses on the relationship between discourse (usually texts) and other elements of social change (Fairclough, 2005). Our theoretical framework draws on Vaara, Kleymann and Seristö (2004), who developed a typology of discourse framing processes (problematisation, rationalisation, fixation, reframing and naturalisation). We then outline our methods of data gathering and handling, and present our empirical analysis of data from 241 websites of large companies in eight European countries. Finally we consider the implications for practitioners and make suggestions for further research.

### **The Social Construction of Gender and Ethnicity**

Whilst individuals in most countries are assigned as either male or female at birth, their gender is developed to a great extent by the way in which male and female roles are promoted by significant influences in society. Such gender role socialisation starts in the family, but carries on into adulthood within various institutions of society. In the organisational world, the constructs of leadership and management have been developed by males for male patterns of employment. Hence organisations can be said to be gendered, producing and reproducing gendered relations where the female is seen as less suited for senior roles, and as in need of protection (Acker, 1990; Benschop and Meihuizen, 2002). However, there are not only gender inequalities but ethnic inequalities too. The patriarchal system privileges the dominant

ethnic group, which in Europe is white as well as male. Equality and diversity policies help to shape gendered and ethnic roles by indicating how such differences are to be treated and managed. In this process, diverse individuals experience their roles and expectations about those roles, which in turn influence how they see themselves and how others see them. Fairclough (1995) argues that organisational texts (in our study, diversity statements) have two subfunctions: a role in the constitution of personal and social identities, and a relational function that helps to constitute relationships between them. One way to gain insight into this phenomenon is to analyse the language used in corporate policy and public relations documents, to see how the notions of gender and ethnic diversity are portrayed on corporate websites, a new arena for such disclosures.

### **Diversity Discourses**

Discourse is a term used for linguistic and other semiotic elements (such as visual images) of a social phenomenon. Discourse "contributes to the construction of social identities, social relations and systems of knowledge and meaning" in organisations (Phillips and Jørgensen, 2002, p.67). Diversity discourses are conveyed therefore through language, symbols and images, which signal the way it is to be interpreted, managed and valued by stakeholders of the company, including diverse present or future employees. Hence we will examine diversity statements mentioning gender and ethnic diversity as texts, as processes of communication and as agents in the construction and maintenance of the meaning of diversity in the business world (Fairclough, 1995; Hardy *et al.*, 2000; Alvesson and Karreman, 2000). In organisational life, senior management has the power to define the desirable traits and behaviours that lead to recruitment and promotion of junior staff. In the European business world, senior management means white males. That power is expressed in language, whether in the description of job advertisements, policies and codes of practice or the sponsorship of applicants for promotion. Lorbiecki and Jack (2000) suggest that even in the new philosophy of managing differences, certain differences are feared and hence have to be controlled. However, gender and racial/ethnic conflicts and tensions might be depoliticised by diversity management policies, as the business face of diversity management may be more acceptable than equal opportunities to the dominant group of white males.

Many companies publicly commit themselves to change, to welcome diversity and to encourage

more women and members of ethnic minorities to join them. In a study of business codes of multinational firms, Kaptein (2004) revealed that 44% of 200 large companies reported formal anti-discrimination codes of practice, 31% mentioned valuing diversity or equality, 35% mentioned respect, 26% mentioned not allowing sexual harassment and 12% not allowing racism. Ballard and Ruling (2001) examined the managing diversity discourse on US, French and German company websites, finding that the business case perspective was not yet embedded in discourses of the European companies. Kirby and Harter (2003) surveyed texts in a small number of diversity consultant websites, finding that discussions of diversity and equality were mainly focused on exploitation of diversity for the employer's advantage. Indeed, they comment that the very term "diversity management" is a metaphor where people have been removed. The discourse of diversity as something to be harnessed indicates that the company is the intended beneficiary, rather than the diverse individual. Half of top European companies use equality or diversity discourses by putting diversity or equality statements on-line, ranging from 86% of top UK firms to only 21% of those in Finland (Point and Singh, 2003). Diversity discourses can also be communicated through photographs, which are symbolic artefacts of the organisational culture, manifesting the values of the company and dynamically creating and setting expectations about how diversity is to be dealt with (Hatch, 1993). Benschop and Meihuizen (2002) found evidence of reinforcement of gender role stereotyping in the photographs in Dutch company annual reports, serving to prolong the processes of domination of those who are visually different. Similarly, in a study of executives portrayed in the US business press, Krefting (2002) reported problematization of the women as leaders in comparison to male executives, echoing as well as reinforcing gendered social relations.

Many leading companies have recognised the need to consider the relative positions in their workforce of women, those from ethnic minorities, and disabled people. In France, for example, there are recommendations for a diversity charter to recognise companies that support cultural and ethnic diversity. Consequently, many European companies, and particularly those in the UK, have adopted the managing diversity discourse – to value and utilise differences within the work place. That discourse can be used as a strategic resource (Hardy *et al.*, 2000), enabling the policy to be designed, promoted and embedded to create

the desired change from the earlier discourse of equal opportunities and anti-discrimination.

### **Critical Discourse Analysis**

Taking a social constructionist perspective, we follow Fairclough's (1995, 2005) critical discourse analysis approach, concerned with relations between social events (such as the adoption of new diversity management philosophies) and the discourses that shape and are shaped by these relationships. Fairclough sees discourses not just as texts but as 'orders of discourse' contextually ordered in time and space, and subject to social interaction. Thus, discourses belong to genres, and diversity statements would be situated in and limited by conventions both for managing diversity and for disclosures of corporate values and policy on websites, at a given point in time. However, the style of the disclosure would vary depending upon the various instigators of the discourse and the media in which it is disclosed. Each of these constituents of the order of discourse may be influenced by the interactions between them, and the sources of power that sustain or change them. Hence critical discourse analysis seeks to investigate the interdiscursive elements of texts: the linguistic and semiotic elements, the social production and consumption of the texts and the social practices that change and are changed by the discourse.

We will analyse diversity discourses embedded in corporate policy pages on websites. Rather than undertaking a linguistic approach to analysing these texts, for our analytical framework, we focus more on the promotion of the discourses. We draw on work by Vaara, Kleymann and Seristö (2004), who identified five types of discursive practices in texts containing discourses on airline alliance strategies: problematisation, rationalisation, fixation, reframing and naturalisation. Vaara *et al.* comment that agents use discourses in the context of power relations, sometimes switching discourses to suit or legitimise their actions, not necessarily believing in the content of their discourse. These discursive practices are utilised by actors, who influence others, who in turn influence the discursive practices, such as promotion of diversity management discourses, reformulating corporate objectives and policies and changing identities. This analytical framework allows us to examine the method of social production of the texts, and to consider the impact upon the consumption of the discourses.

*Problematization* is the 'construction' of a problem via the discursive framing of an object

in a negative way. In terms of diversity, this is related to the discrimination and fairness perspective that sees difference as a cause of problems (Dass and Parker, 1999). This often is evidenced in website statements revealing anti-discrimination and equal opportunities management policies (Singh and Point, 2004). This policy positions those who are different as in need of protection, unless more positive messages are also given about valuing diversity. *Rationalisation* means providing a explanation for the treatment of the phenomenon, here the justification and arguments for managing diversity. This approach is related to the access and legitimacy perspective that frames diversity as creating business opportunities (Dass and Parker, 1999). It also leads into the argument for particular benefits from managing diversity, such as better performance, enhanced reputation and an inclusive workplace (Singh and Point, 2004).

*Fixation* refers to the persistence of particular deeply-held values and views that are expressed even as other arguments are made that are incompatible with those views. As far as diversity discourses are concerned, the liberal view that the cream will always rise to the top and so only minimal interventions are needed to address discrimination may be a fixation that could explain why so little progress has been made by equal opportunities management policies.

*Reframing* refers to the change in positioning of the issue, identifying the problem but focusing on solutions, for example. In the Vaara *et al.* study, reframing occurred by setting out the problems of airline alliances, but focusing on putting the new strategies into practice. The criticism of the initial idea (the alliances) was deflected into criticism of the execution of the new discourse, protecting the new idea from direct critique. The *naturalisation* of a discourse means that it has been so deeply embedded into discourses about the way forward that alternatives are no longer under discussion.

## Methodology

Early in 2003, we downloaded web pages from the top 241 companies from eight countries (Finland, France, Germany, Netherlands, Norway, Sweden, Switzerland and UK), selected on the basis of their inclusion at the top of their respective national stock exchange lists. We sampled top companies as they would be likely to be among the first to face the impact of the shrinking talent pool, globalisation and increased calls for transparency of corporate governance and social responsibility. A key advantage of the

use of websites is that data can be collected from every company in the sample, in contrast to use of a survey where a low response rate would be likely, given the sensitive nature of the issue under enquiry. However, we are limited to analysis of the actual discourses presented, and consideration only of the *potential* impact on social relations, as we do not know to what extent these discourses were enacted, nor the actual impact upon audiences other than ourselves. Nonetheless, as reflective researchers, in the act of deconstructing the website statements, we are also part of the audience, as we have considered the embedded meanings within these discourses and the readings which we would understand from them.

Every company in our sample had a corporate website with similar pages in English and in the home languages (except for one Finnish company with just Finnish pages). We found diversity and/or equality mentions at various locations, ranging from corporate values pages at high levels to corporate social responsibility pages, and careers or human resource management policies, often buried down several levels on the websites. The location of the diversity statement was itself a property of the discourse, as high page level is an indicator of the importance with which the company views the issue of diversity (Lymer, 1996), and the page positioning such as 'Careers' indicated the target group of stakeholders for the message. We also used the search engines in both English and the home languages.

We downloaded all the relevant material, and prepared the texts for analysis using QSR Nudist 5. Together, we set up a detailed coding scheme, defining and structuring our nodes, adjusting coding through frequent joint discussions for consistency. Main coding branches contained the properties of the diversity statements themselves, the dimensions of diversity, the drivers for diversity and the stage of the journey from equality to diversity management. (These findings are reported elsewhere.) Next, we decided to undertake a separate critical discourse analysis of the texts, taking an in-depth look at the micro-level discourses around gender and ethnicity. Within an overall realist perspective which allows for a social constructionist approach (Fairclough, 2005), we deconstructed the diversity statements again, using critical discourse analysis to examine the texts, the contexts and the visual images. We re-read the texts looking for elements of discourses suggested by Fairclough (1995), and constructed a coding branch which eventually had nodes for the

discursive practices outlined in Vaara *et al.* (2004), *i.e.* problematisation, rationalisation, fixation, reframing and naturalisation, and a branch for other discursive tools supporting the discourse (images, symbols, statistics).

## FINDINGS

First we present the international differences in mentions of gender and ethnic diversity on corporate websites, before examining the ways

in which these particular categories of diversity were presented. Analysis of diversity statements revealed that companies use a variety of discursive tools, including framing their company's particular approach to managing diversity, and supporting these by symbolic depictions (photographs, awards etc) and careful use of statistics.

**Table I: Companies mentioning gender and ethnic diversity in diversity statements**

Sample (241 Companies)	Finland	France	Germany	Netherlands	Norway	Sweden	Switzerland	UK
Mentioning gender and ethnicity	12%	5%	11%	44%	6%	20%	8%	62%
Mentioning gender	23%	13%	29%	44%	17%	33%	20%	72%
Mentioning ethnicity	12%	5%	11%	44%	5%	23%	16%	70%

### Websites mentioning Gender and Ethnic Diversity

We found that 174 of the 241 websites gave some dimensions of diversity especially in their anti-discrimination lists (stating that discrimination would not be allowed on grounds of a number of dimensions) of which 48% of those mentioned gender/sex and 37% race/ethnicity. Table I shows the results for companies by country. It is interesting that Dutch companies either mention both gender and ethnicity, or neither, whereas only 8% of Swiss companies mention both but 20% mention gender. Almost as many UK companies mention both gender and ethnicity (62%) as the single dimensions of gender (72%) and ethnicity (70%).

Gender/sex equality was the most common dimension noted, particularly for the UK, Sweden and Finland, but this was mentioned only by a fifth of French companies with diversity or equality statements. We coded both sex and gender to one node, but sex was mentioned by 27 companies, 49 preferred to use the term gender, and the remaining seven used both terms.

Following practice in the UK, where "ethnic monitoring" is recommended by the Commission for Racial Equality to identify any instances and consequences of racial discrimination in the workplace, we coded race and ethnicity together as one category of difference. Race/ethnicity was mentioned by 64 websites, with three sites including colour as a separate dimension. However, 51 sites mentioned nationality or

country of origin, which may or may not be closely associated with race and ethnicity. French and German companies were more likely to use the term "culture" without defining what they meant by the term, so we are unclear whether they intended 'culture' to include race and ethnicity dimensions.

### The Diversity Discourses

From Vaara *et al.*'s (2004) typology of discourses, we identified four different discourses promoting gender and ethnicity in European corporate websites. These were problematisation, rationalisation, reframing and naturalising. We will examine each of these in turn.

### Problematisation of Gender and Ethnic Diversity

Sometimes diversity and its management were problematised. One could argue that the very absence of the term 'diversity' was a problematisation, in that the issue was not even on the agenda for the commissioners or authors of web pages for the 68 companies (28%) with no statement on diversity or equality on their websites. This ranged from 2% of top UK companies to 43% of Finnish companies. We do not know who was responsible for this omission, nor whether the head of strategic management, the HR department or public relations department were involved in the corporate website texts. The most common way of problematising diversity was to present diversity only as something in need of policing and protection, with no mention of respecting, valuing or utilising diversity. Sixteen companies reported only that they would not allow

discrimination on a range of diversity dimensions.

*Hennes, Sweden: No worker should be discriminated against because of race, gender, religion or ethnic background.*

Even though the statement was made with presumed good intentions, there is still a negative association, which may be picked up by the reader, if that is the only mention of diversity.

### **Rationalisation of Gender and Ethnic Diversity**

Many companies presented a rationale as to why gender and ethnic diversity were important. This allowed for justification of the company's decision to value diversity, i.e. wider legitimisation of the strategy of those with the power to make such a decision, and a tool to convince those resisting the new approach by providing a rational argument for it (Suchman, 1995).

*Nokia, Finland: We must always hire the best people we can find. By definition, this includes people of diverse nationalities and cultural backgrounds.*

Bâloise rationalised the need for equal opportunities for men and women, but also indicated their progressive facilitation of work/life balance by provision of support systems for women with children.

*Bâloise, Switzerland: An environment conducive to top-notch performance includes equal opportunities for men and women, evidenced by practice. Women with children are offered flexible working hours and the use of a crèche at the Group's Head Office in Basel, which facilitates a satisfactory combination of career and family.*

They did not, however, state that men were also offered flexible working and use of the crèche facilities. Perhaps men at work are not associated with family responsibilities, in a country where women often do not return to develop careers, but provide support to their career-oriented husbands. In this discourse, only female employees were constructed as 'parents who need childcare support'. However, Swisscom, took a slightly different approach in explaining that they did not need special treatment for women because they had adequate equality policies, with 14% of senior managers being female in relation to their 36% female workforce. Commerzbank revealed that

they had been helping parents to gain work/life balance since 1989, unusual policies at that time. They provide a strong rationale, using the metaphor of the level playing field, acknowledging that equal opportunities management had not provided an adequate structure for women to develop and make a full contribution. They appear to be proactive in their managing diversity strategies, and acknowledge that diversity includes women who want careers, and men and women with various lifestyle responsibilities and choices.

Some companies painstakingly set out their arguments for diversity including gender and ethnicity, particularly about the need to reflect the diversity of the market – the business case rather than the social justice or moral case. A good example is the Electrolux statement, where there is reinforcement of the message after the case has been explained, to remind readers that diversity is an asset. They used a rhetorical device at the end of the statement, challenging readers to consider their own perspective.

*Electrolux, Sweden: At Electrolux, we are making constant efforts to improve our perspectives on global business management and to broaden our recruiting base. We have a diversity of customers in nationality, age, gender and ethnic background. In order to serve them well, we aim to reflect market diversity with internal diversity. This will help increase our sensitivity to local needs and cultural biases. Diversity, in other words, is an asset. It provides productive tensions and creativity in our management, process and development teams. It is at the core of our recruitment. We encourage diversity. Do you?*

### **Fixation**

We found little direct evidence of fixation of the diversity discourse. Fixation means the retention of former discourses and resistance to the new. We found no statements rejecting equality or diversity management. However, it could be held that the absence of any mention of diversity or equality on 28% of the 241 websites indicates lack of appreciation of its importance in the social construction of diversity relations in those companies, and perhaps fixation on liberal views that the best talent will always come through regardless of gender, diversity etc. There were a number of statements reinforcing the message that the companies were solid meritocracies, without indicating any strategies for valuing or managing diversity.

*Sulzer, Switzerland: Co-workers can expect salaries based on performance and success, opportunities for personal development and individual support, free of discrimination.*

### **Reframing of Diversity Problem as Implementation Issues**

The actors involved in creating the discourse of diversity management often locate this within the context of an earlier discourse, equal opportunities, but move the arguments forward. For example, Adecco reported that they were running workshops on discrimination and diversity awareness.

*Adecco, Switzerland: Based upon the success of its Diversity programme, Adecco in France signed an agreement with FASILD and the French Labour Ministry to work together with companies to support the spread of diversity 'best practice' to other sectors. This involves providing expertise for activities such as staff meetings focused upon discrimination issues, implementing task forces to identify and address possible discrimination risks, sensitise companies and colleague training.*

Similarly, the UK retail chemists, Boots, reported on the website that they had set up a series of briefings, and that they monitored the demographic composition of their workforce, whilst Alliance & Leicester stated that they sought to improve the diversity 'problem' via constructive discussions, indicating that perhaps there had been less constructive discussions in the past. Another example is Kingfisher, who referred to potential damage to reputation from not managing diversity well. However, the second sentence associates diversity with the positive benefits in terms of improved customer service, so the statement is framed to end on the positive side of the business case.

*Kingfisher, UK: Any organisation that has discrimination in its workforce based on gender, colour, race or physical ability is at the very least in danger of harming its reputation, and may be liable to prosecution. In today's retail environment, a business that understands and respects the diverse needs and values of its employees and customers has a competitive edge.*

Telenor grounds its approach in a social justice rationale, indicating that they still had work to do to achieve the desired state. This would be a joint action for management and unions, the

stated agents for implementation of dialogue. Telia makes a statement about working towards a more balanced work/leisure environment for employees, rather than work/family balance – thus avoiding potential backlash from men and women with no childcare responsibilities.

*Telenor, Norway: The Group has an equal opportunities policy. The aim of this policy is to ensure that no job application or staff member receives less favourable treatment on the grounds of race, colour, religion, nationality, ethnic or national origin, sexual orientation, marital status or physical disability. The Group continues to participate in a joint management/union equal opportunities forum to better facilitate constructive dialogue on equality issues.*

*Telia, Sweden: Since the beginning of the 1990s, we have endeavoured to improve the balance between women and men in various positions within the Group. We have also been working toward an environment in which employees can feel that it is acceptable to combine their careers with their leisure activities.*

Indeed, discourses are always located within a context of earlier discourses, but the link is not always explicitly made. However, the Dutch company ING first define what they mean by diversity, and what valuing diversity means in practice. The view of diversity for competitive advantage is then spelt out, and embedded within HR policy commitments.

*ING, Netherlands: We define 'valuing diversity' as accepting and respecting individual differences arising out of variation in race, ethnicity, gender, age, sexual orientation, socio-economic status, physical abilities, religious beliefs, or other ideologies. For ING this implies a balance between men and women, young and old, and between different ethnic groups and nationalities. We also want to offer a good working environment for part-timers and employees with a disability. We consider diversity to be not only a social responsibility but a long-term business advantage. Encouraging diversity at all levels of the organisation is therefore an important theme in our human resources policy, in our commitment to socially responsible entrepreneurship, and in our business strategy.*

Similar statements were found from other companies, including the Swedish Handelsbanken.

### **Naturalisation of Diversity as Competitive Advantage**

As the discourses are promoted, and begin to resonate with the audiences, the companies can start to present their diversity policies as the natural and obvious way forward, sound common sense, and not to be challenged. This may be done by pointing out the obvious, as ABB does, very similar to the statement of Nokia about cultural diversity.

*ABB, Sweden/Switzerland: ABB wants to achieve the best performance possible in all areas of the company. To do this, it needs the best people in the market. And obviously the best people will consist of both men and women.*

*Nokia, Finland: We must always hire the best people we can find. By definition, this includes people of diverse nationalities and cultural backgrounds.*

Another way of naturalising the discourse is to indicate very high levels of support for it. Barclays does this by indicating that very senior executives have signed a charter, whilst Phillips informs the reader that ethnic diversity fits with the company's general business principles, in both cases leaving little uncertainty about the importance of this discourse to those in power.

*Barclays, UK: Our view is that Equality and Diversity must be integrated into everything we do and to achieve this we have put in place a demanding global strategy. Our most senior executives have personally signed a charter entitled "Success through Inclusion" setting out our vision and commitment to equality and diversity for our employees, our customers, for the community and for shareholders.*

Sometimes the diversity statements are made with incontestable panache – as is the case of Nobel Biocare. After confirming that gender issues are of central importance, they inform us that women hold the two most senior executive positions on the board.

*Nobel Biocare, Sweden: To ensure the availability of competence inside the company, Nobel Biocare strives to give all employees the same opportunities to develop. Gender equality issues are therefore of central importance to Nobel Biocare, 50 percent of whose employees*

*are female. The central role played by gender equality issues is demonstrated not least by the relatively large and growing percentage of women in leading positions. Of recent managerial appointments, 90 percent involved women. This includes the CEO and CFO.*

### **The Discourse of Gender Diversity as Competitive Advantage**

Interestingly, only 15 of 241 companies (6%) referred specifically to gender diversity as a source of competitive advantage and improved performance. Four of these referred to the recruitment and talent management aspects, but focused on different aspects. Fortum and ABB emphasised better performance.

*Fortum, Finland: Women account for approximately 10% of the top management. At Fortum, we believe, however, that a more even breakdown by gender will give us a competitive edge in the future, both on the market and in competing for the possible personnel.*

However, the French engineering company, Alstom, emphasised the enhanced creativity and better decision-making that come from gender diversity, but as is common in French statements, they did not mention ethnic diversity.

*Alstom has several reasons to recruit women into its teams, because it is a company that: is constantly on the lookout for new expertise, is rapidly developing its service business, and needs diversity to promote creativity and decision-making. We have thus decided to actively promote the recruitment of women. It's not by chance that the companies doing best are also the ones that have the most women in key positions!*

Framing gender diversity in an equal opportunities discourse, Nobel Biocare reported their rationale for this as a competence development issue for the organisation. The UK retail company GUS indicated that it saw gender and race as characteristics from which others could learn, indicating that they fell into the proactive learning category identified by Dass and Parker (1999).

*Nobel Biocare, Sweden: To ensure that Nobel Biocare can recruit, keep and develop the right competence, it is a pre-requisite that all employees are given the same opportunities within the company. Thus, gender equality and respect for*



*people regardless of age, cultural and ethnical background is of central importance to Nobel Biocare.*

*GUS, UK: We believe that companies benefit from a diverse workforce, with a good mix of gender, ages, races and backgrounds. It means that people can learn from each other.*

This is in contrast to the way that most of the 88 companies in the sample mentioning diversity for competitive advantage positioned this at the more general level of diversity, seemingly ignoring the fact that the largest minority group under-represented in management in these eight countries is likely to be female employees. Perhaps this is seen as a more acceptable or less threatening management approach, as many other minority groups will form a much smaller percentage of the workforce and hence will not be competing with white males on the same scale.

To determine whether espoused gender diversity policies are manifested by gender diversity on the corporate board, we can use accurate secondary data on the same 50 UK firms (in this study) gathered for the Female FTSE 100 Index 2003 (Singh and Vinnicombe, 2003). We found diversity or equality statements on 49 of the top 50 company websites, and 44 companies had female directors. Indeed they had 68 (67%) of the total 101 female directors in the FTSE 100 Index. Of these 44 companies, 38 promoted diversity management strategies, 34 of them suggesting competitive advantage rationales. Importantly, only five companies promoting diversity management had no women directors in 2003. Therefore it would appear that 38 of the 50 top UK companies, by their appointments at board level, are starting to enact the valuing gender diversity discourse.

### ***The Discourse of Ethnic Diversity as Competitive Advantage***

Only ten companies (4%) specifically referred to ethnicity as a source of competitive advantage, including nine of the companies identifying gender diversity too. This is in stark contrast to its very prominent listing in the anti-discrimination lists, usually in first or second position, indicating that ethnic diversity still is mainly considered as in need of protection. Exceptionally, the chemicals company, BOC, not only promotes ethnic diversity in its web statements for contributing through the company to improvement of people's lives but this company reflects diversity in the composition of its board, with 17% of their board from ethnic

minorities as well as having a female director (Singh, 2004).

*BOC, UK: The BOC Group is truly global and values the rich ethnic and cultural diversity of its people. Their dedication, commitment and talent have made a difference to the lives of ordinary people across the world for over a hundred years.*

The Norwegian company, Orkla, was one of the few to be specific about both gender and ethnic diversity in terms of competitive advantage, although Orkla takes a very normative approach (it "must be valued and utilised") and does not state why. Phillips has a more vague statement about the enrichment of society rather than the their own business, but it is powerfully positioned as a company business principle.

*Orkla, Norway: Personal differences in age or gender and ethnic, national and cultural differences constitute a valuable diversity that must be respected and utilised in the best interests of the competitiveness of the Group.*

*Phillips, Netherlands: The company's general business principles hold that 'Ethnic and cultural differences throughout the world enrich society'.*

French and German companies in particular seem to avoid the term ethnic/racial diversity, despite both countries having large populations of immigrants from different ethnic backgrounds. Sometimes the discourse is non-specific about ethnicity but does specify gender diversity.

*Infineon, Germany. The diversity in our people's cultural and educational backgrounds, gender and age is an exceptional advantage and a great challenge. In determination to make this diversity one of our key factors, we do everything we can to create an atmosphere where awareness of, and respect for individual differences is promoted.*

Electrolux of Sweden, cited earlier, does make an explicit link, albeit focused on exploitation of the resource of diversity to improve service delivery. The frequent omission of these terms indicates that racial equality in management may be a discourse too far – the "old guard" may be protecting their power base, presenting a general impression that different cultures are good, but avoiding the explicit promotion of racial equality. This could be because these companies want to take a "softly, softly" approach to moving the diversity agenda

forward without causing a backlash from the dominant white male majority. Alternatively, they may not yet be aware of the benefits of managing diversity, may not yet have faced up to the issue, or do not want to face the issue. Such framing of desirable forms of diversity as cultural rather than gender and racial diversity may well reflect the low employment status of women and those from ethnic minorities, as few people from these minorities reach senior management level positions, even in large companies doing international business. But there is a strong valuing of international backgrounds in the European discourses evidenced in these diversity statements. Nokia is a good example.

*Nokia, Finland: Not only is the world our marketplace, it is our talent pool as well. Therefore diversity is an important aspect of our business for many reasons but especially the following: To succeed in a diversified market place, creativity is a key factor for success. Diverse teams are more creative and find better solutions than homogenous teams. We must mirror the diversity of the marketplace in our organisation to ensure that we understand our customers' needs. We must always hire the best people we can find. By definition, this includes people of diverse nationalities and cultural backgrounds.*

Although Nokia's statement does not explicitly mention ethnicity, the author may have assumed that people would read ethnicity as included. The findings that international and cultural diversity are valued specifically, but not ethnic and racial diversity may reflect very forward-looking views, which ignore racial and colour differences, or may be evidence of other discourses working to maintain social relations based on the power of majority groups to define

what is to be valued in future. Certainly we see an increasing Europeanisation and internationalisation of directors in top UK companies (Singh, 2004) whereas the phenomenon appears to be emergent in other European countries such as Sweden or the Netherlands (Heijltjes et al., 2003).

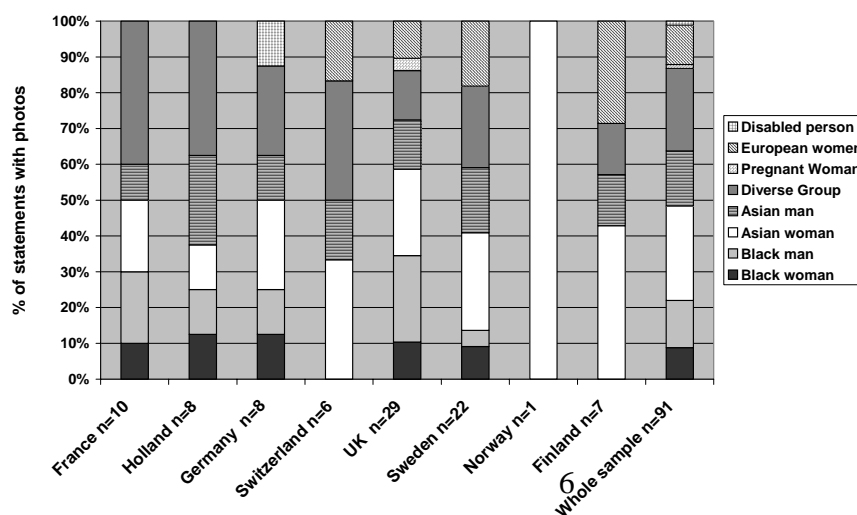
### Other Tools for Promoting Diversity Discourses

#### Images of Gender and Ethnic Diversity

However, it is not only through texts that diversity is promoted. There are other artefacts, including photographs and symbols. The design of the web pages on which diversity is mentioned has symbolic significance, as well as the actual scripts. Of the 174 company websites that mentioned diversity or equality or anti-discrimination policies, a quarter had a single photograph relating to gender and ethnicity, usually on the careers or HR/People pages. A further 14 companies had two photographs, and 18 had three or more.

The most popular image was that of a young Asian woman (24 sites), followed by 21 sites showing a racially/sexually diverse group. An Asian male was shown on 14 sites, a black male on 12 sites, and a white female on ten sites. The UK, German and Swedish companies had the widest variation in their choice of images for the diversity sites. Figure 1 shows that the image of the black woman was absent from Norwegian, Finnish and Swiss company diversity statements' photographs, whilst European women were shown on Swedish, Finnish, Swiss and UK company sites. One UK company portrayed a pregnant young woman, but it was not clear whether she was intended to symbolise the future, good maternity leave conditions or a construction of women as "mothers".

Figure 1: Photograph types used by companies by country



Visual images revealed new constructions of the “desirable” diverse employee, most often the female Asian technical expert. It is interesting that many of the Asians were depicted as serious technical experts in white coats and laboratory/hospital workplaces, in contrast to some of the black subjects who were shown in informal clothes with full smiles, including one group of black workers in boiler suits and Swedish company hats. Previous research by Anderson and Imperia (1992) shows that male executives are less likely to be portrayed smiling than male workers, indicating that in such social relations, the smiling was a feature of the subordinate being anxious to please. The wide smiles in some photographs may also be indicative of the use of diversity as a device for managing social relations, with photographs as artefacts supporting moral regulation of happy co-existence between groups. In some group photographs, a European male is shown surrounded by or leading a group of ethnically diverse young workers, suggesting the continued domination of the white middle-aged male stereotype leader. The Swedish company, Sandvik, showed a mixed group of executives standing around a very senior-looking white male and a black male executive. The impression is given that the tall silver-haired European male is the dominant person in the group, and that the black executive is making a serious point; perhaps he is the leader of the team behind him. The photograph used by the Finnish company, Ahlstrom, presents a group of physically attractive young professionals on a beach playing volleyball. The group has males and females, black and white, dressed in modern business clothes with a hint of sexuality (the women’s long but split skirts) with everyone symbolically striving for goals, and the black male reaching highest – perhaps a sporting stereotype but nonetheless powerful.

Another image was that of a successful mid-career Asian female entertaining another woman in a restaurant business meeting, implying seniority, access to financial resources and networks. Renault showed two young female sharp-suited executives, moving up an escalator at pace, one blonde, the other Asian, highly symbolic, fresh and modern. HBOS, the UK bank portrayed a youngish black female executive, very confident, very professional – but such images were more frequently of European or Asian women. The images used of only European females suggest that the focus is on gender diversity, but only for white women, again sustaining the stereotype of whiteness as privileged over non-whiteness.

We would expect that close attention would be given to the selection of appropriate photographs for the diversity pages of the corporate web site. They are visual representations of social and power relations around gender, ethnicity and other dimensions that the company wishes to promote. However, some of these findings echo those of Benschop and Meihuizen (2002), that women and men in annual reports were portrayed in ways that reinforced gender role stereotypes and maintained traditional power bases. Old gender and ethnic stereotypes are sometimes sustained, whilst new ones are created in other companies, particularly the professional Asian female, the businesswomen conducting business in the restaurant, and the confident young ethnic executives (who are missing from company websites in some countries).

### **Symbols**

Sometimes images were of prizes or symbols of awards, such as the best place for mothers at work (eg Pearson). This indicates that not only is the employer open to diversity in terms of parental responsibility, but also that it is proud to be associated with such diversity. In other words, there is some normalising of the employee with these diverse characteristics, through communication to the reader, whether manager, employee or potential recruit, or to shareholders and potential investors. Schering (Germany) is a good example. The company was awarded the EU Gender Equality at the Workplace Award 2003. In its website, Schering emphasises that it has a long history of equality, maintaining a policy unit for women’s affairs, promoting dialogue between men and women, discussing rather than ignoring the issue. Several other companies mention awards for gender diversity on their websites, including Aviva, Barclays, Deutsche Telekom, HBOS, Lloyds TSB and Prudential. As well as prizes, other symbols were those associated with particular memberships, for example, in the UK, Opportunity Now (gender) and Race for Equality.

### **Diversity Statistics**

To enhance the strength of the message about tackling inequalities, 21 companies (9%) provide statistics for female staff, and less frequently, seven (3%) give figures for ethnic minority staff and management. Thirteen companies indicate the proportion of women in the company, two show the proportion of women entrants, twelve reveal the percentage of women in management, and seven indicate proportions of women at senior management. At Carrefour, the proportion of women employees is 54%, and

they report that in their Thai subsidiary, half of senior managers are female, but interestingly do not reveal statistics for French-based branches. At Marks & Spencer, the overall proportion of women employees is 81%, but they have the distinction of 62% female senior management, and a third of the board is female. There were big variations in reported levels of women in management. Nobel Biocare reported that 47% of top management was female (including chief executive and chief finance officer), whilst at Reed it was 22% and at Sainsbury, 9%, but of course, definitions of 'top management' would be needed for comparisons to be made.

To underline successful efforts in promoting women to key positions, some companies provide comparative figures. Hence, Bayer shows that women now form 10% of managers compared to 5% ten years ago. Two UK companies highlight targets for the coming years. In Shell, women represent 7.9% of senior executives, with a target of 20% by 2008, whilst Barclays states that women hold 11% of senior executive positions, with a target of 22% in 2006. Another device used by Kingfisher is to explain that the proportions of women employed as senior executives/senior managers, and as middle managers are part of their performance indicators, showing transparency on targets and progress towards gender equality.

Only seven companies gave statistics for ethnic diversity. Ethnic diversity is a sensitive subject, even in the UK. Many companies do not gather ethnicity statistics despite recommendations from advisory bodies (e.g. the Commission for Racial Equality in the UK), and hence would not even have the data to be able to reveal statistics. An exception was HBOS, with an overall ethnic representation in the UK retail bank over 7%, but with over 30% in some towns. HBOS actively portrays ethnic diversity in photographs on its website, including black male and female executives. Also revealing ethnicity in management were two UK high street retailers, Marks and Spencer (6%, compared to 11% overall, and close to the national ethnic minority population of 7%) and Sainsbury (9% of store managers, of 12% overall). Companies such as Shell and BP give statistics for non-UK nationals in management but are not specific about ethnicity.

## Discussion

Clearly some top companies are using the notions of gender and ethnicity in diversity statements as strategic resources (Hardy *et al.* 2000). According to Kirby and Harter (2003), competitive advantage represents a key driver

for promoting diversity – revealed in practitioner-oriented books, diversity training and consultants' websites. Our results have shown that some companies have used the weight of support from top executives to make sure that there is no resistance to the discourse. Others have used common sense arguments that leave little room for challenge by resisters, such as the fact that half of the available talent is located in its women employees. Furthermore, it is somewhat surprising that only fifteen (6%) of 241 companies specifically promoted the gender dimension of diversity on-line as part of the discourse of 'diversity for competitive advantage' and that even fewer (4%) included ethnicity. Given that women make up half of the workforce in most of these countries, and given the demographic changes fast approaching, more explicit reference to those dimensions could have been expected. It is even more surprising given that EU member states have had to introduce or tighten anti-discrimination measures recently on grounds of sex and race as well as new protection for religious beliefs, disability, age and sexual orientation (EC, 2004). As for ethnicity, even in those European countries where traditionally the population was homogenous, there have recently been large increases in immigration. Economists emphasise the urgent need for more workers to contribute to meeting increasing demands for pensions and health benefits in the future. But increased immigration is not a popular cause, and ethnic minorities are not usually being associated with increased work performance in the new diversity discourses.

There is another aspect of the valuing diversity issue, evidenced by the study of Kochan *et al.* (2003). Whilst gender diversity does appear to bring enhanced team performance, ethnic diversity without active and good diversity management may lead to poorer performance, because of increased conflict with the majority and withdrawal of involvement by minority individuals. Few companies mentioned the challenge that this presented – Telenor of Norway being an exception – "diversity puts new demands on our managers and our employees".

In the very few cases where gender and ethnic diversity are explicitly linked with the 'diversity for competitive advantage' discourse, the diversity statements are socially constructing meanings of gender and ethnicity as objects in the discourse. These notions are portrayed as resources to be harnessed for the organisation, particularly in terms of helping it to understand and meet its customer needs. In addition, in some web statements, women and ethnic

minority groups are identified as valuable individuals, the best of the talent pool, who could enable the organisation to learn to do its work better (the learning perspective mentioned by Dass and Parker, 1999). In other companies, even though women are often identified as being in an unequal position, at least diversity management is on the agenda, through the revelation of statistics and occasionally targets, and there is public commitment to implement change. Legitimacy theory (Suchman, 1995) would explain the use of diversity statistics, targets for minority groups in leadership, prizes and memberships of gender and ethnic diversity lobby organisations, as companies seek to show evidence of their corporate social responsibility.

The gender and ethnicity categories sometimes intersect when it comes to the visual presentation of diversity through photographs, with the new image of the preferred female Asian technical expert. We find old stereotypes in some group photographs with senior white male managers surrounded by young diverse individuals. Photographs can be very influential - as the saying goes, pictures can speak louder than words. The fact that Scandinavian and Swiss companies often use photographs of European women indicates that for them, diversity is mainly about white women. The diversity as competitive advantage discourse is most strongly used in top UK companies, where gender and ethnic diversity are more often explicitly addressed. In contrast, the discourse of diversity used in Germany and France is seldom explicitly related to gender and ethnicity, but to cultural and international diversity (Bellard and Ruling, 2001).

These findings reflect Kaptein's (2004) survey of multi-national company employment codes, which showed that companies are more likely to focus on anti-discrimination codes of practices than valuing diversity. Hence, they are problematising and rationalising gender and ethnicity rather than naturalising diversity as competitive advantage. Our results also reveal that often gender, and usually ethnicity are not specified as valuable characteristics for competitive advantage, echoing comments made by UK FTSE 100 chairmen (Russell Reynolds, 2002) that in the selection of directors, gender and ethnicity did not matter a damn, but nationality (meaning international) was good. There is evidence that international diversity and cultural diversity are highly valued (at least in these discursive on-line statements about diversity), especially by French and German companies. Where that is coupled with a promise of an inclusive culture, this would a

powerful and welcoming message to those who are from minority groups. However, given that gender and racial equality have not yet been achieved, certainly at board level, and often at middle management level, then the absence of these characteristics in so much of the discourse of diversity and competitive advantage can be read in two ways. People with those differences are not highly valued; or those various differences are valued and have been incorporated into a new discourse of general "cultural diversity". Are the general statements saying that every individual *is* not only welcomed but also is seen as bringing significant advantages from that diversity, from which everyone including managers should learn, growing a culturally aware, diverse and competitive organization? Further evidence is needed to explore this issue.

## Conclusions

This study extends the work of Kirby and Harter (2003) on diversity discourses on diversity consultants' websites by taking a European perspective on the discourse associated with diversity for competitive advantage, across a large number of important companies, and by its focus on gender and ethnic diversity. This paper extends previous work on overall diversity dimensions (Point and Singh, 2003) and on diversity management strategies and stages (Singh and Point, 2004) in its focus on the strategic use of the discourses of gender and ethnic diversity for competitive advantage. Only a small number of top European companies are using diversity discourses specifically in terms of gender and ethnicity as strategic resources, sending the message that diversity is linked to corporate advantage. In terms of promotion of the discourse of 'diversity for competitive advantage', the UK is way ahead of the rest of Europe, as well as in terms of explicit reference to gender and ethnicity. Importantly, the UK companies are demonstrating far more than just lip service to diversity, evidenced by the relatively high number of female directors on their main boards.

This study adds to the debate as to whether diversity management is the best way forward in achieving equality of outcomes for diverse groups such as women and those from ethnic minorities (Liff, 1999; Lorbiecki and Jack, 2000), by identifying what companies say they believe about diversity, equality and competitive advantage, and why they say they believe it, in the new digital medium of the corporate website. Their reasons are to enhance their company competence, cultural learning, talent management and better recruitment, as well as

increase creativity. In addition, gender and ethnicity are said to bring competitive advantage through mirroring and understanding the customer base. Although a few companies still frame diversity as a problem or in need of protection as was the case particularly for ethnic diversity, more companies use a rationalisation discourse, explaining why diversity is an important issue. The discourses are often set explicitly in a change context, with the issue being reframed in enactment mode, with new socially responsible policies aiming for a better environment for everyone. As Liff (1999) indicated, companies are still drawing on earlier equality and social justice discourses at the same time as promoting the new diversity discourse. Some companies have come further still, presenting their diversity discourses as the natural and only way forward, strongly championed by senior executives. For them, gender and ethnic diversity relations have been embedded within the corporate discourse, new power relations have emerged, and the business case has taken over the earlier equal opportunities discourse. We found that the discourse analysis framework (problematisation, rationalisation, fixation, reframing and naturalisation) suggested by Vaara *et al.* (2004) to be a useful tool for analysing texts in terms of the ways in which the discourses were framed.

The study also adds to work by Benschop and Meihuizen (2002) in identifying the use of photographs that in some cases create new models such as the desirable Asian female expert employee, but in others, serve to reinforce existing stereotypes of leaders as white males. In the process of promoting this rhetoric on corporate websites, companies are reframing how diverse characteristics are to be valued by their stakeholders, or supporting old stereotypes and unequal gender and ethnic diversity power relations in organisations.

### ***Implications for Practitioners***

The key point for practitioners is that close attention needs to be paid to the design of the on-line diversity statement, and to its presentation, after clarity has been reached about the particular philosophy for managing difference, the rationale, and the goals of the policy. The language associated with diversity is extremely important in constructing more positive views on what diversity means, why it is important, what needs to be done, who is to do it, and crucially, how much commitment there is from senior management to drive the change. Careful consideration should be given to clarifying the ethnicity dimension, because of the ambiguity of possible euphemisms such as

'cultural diversity' or 'different backgrounds' where readers may make other assumptions than those intended by the company. Ignoring diversity is a message in itself, telling stakeholders that diversity is not sufficiently valued to merit mention in the new digital medium. Statement designers should consider how the new discourse of managing diversity sits in relation to earlier discourses of equality espoused by the company. They should identify the intended stakeholders, as well as the audience and the actors. The managing diversity discourse would be more powerful and more likely to lead to acceptance of the new philosophy as a genuine wish to be more inclusive, if the two largest minority characteristics of gender and ethnicity/race were specifically mentioned in a positive and forward-looking approach, rather than as a problem needing policing and protection. Only a few companies are doing this for gender and ethnicity. The selection of accompanying photographs is critical, if old stereotypes of leaders as white males and women as auxiliary support are to be eliminated.

### ***Limitations and Suggestions for Further Research***

This research explored only the presentation and discourses of diversity statements on-line, but did not consider evidence of the enacted diversity policies of these companies. We suggest further research where access can be gained to some of the companies sampled here, to evaluate the struggles and achievements that they have made to develop the next generation of leaders from a more diverse pool of talent.

Our study is based on voluntary statements of companies on corporate websites. We excluded statements in annual reports, even where available on-line, as in some countries, there was a legal obligation to disclose human resource management policies in annual reports. Further research should examine diversity discourses in annual reports, taking into account varying legal requirements for disclosures. We sought permission to use some diversity photographs from the websites but such images were owned by webpage designers and therefore could not be reproduced for this article.

There is inevitably bias from our position as researchers, in terms of our skills at negotiating paths through complex websites, through our world-views as we analysed the data, through our skills as discourse analysts, and in our presentation of results. Our own diversity (gender, age, nationality, language and

international backgrounds) was an asset, as we had to challenge our shared and individual assumptions and understandings of our data. We also impacted the websites visited, leaving traces of search terms that website managers might examine in their intelligence gathering for marketing purposes. On revisiting websites, we often found changes, with some companies introducing or revising diversity statements after our data collection date.

This brings us to another key limitation of our research, that it is only a snapshot view early in 2003. Websites are frequently updated, and hence these disclosures of diversity policies play only a time-limited role in the social construction of diversity. Nonetheless, as the web begins to play an increasing part in constructing meanings in our lives, it is important that social inequalities in the workplace based on gender and race are not reinforced by empty rhetoric on websites. Companies could use this new digital medium more effectively if they were to give increased attention to the framing of diversity in their public relations material, aligning it with their corporate philosophy for managing, respecting, valuing and utilising difference to the benefit of the diverse individuals as well as the company's commercial success.

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