Doing Critical Research for the Government of Australia

By Amanda Sinclair

Abstract

This paper describes a research process of control and resistance where we, as researchers sought to interpose critical perspectives and insights within the managerially-oriented ideology of an Australian Government policy program. The government wanted research which would convince managers about the `business benefits' of diversity. We wanted to do research into why some leaders cared about diversity and most did not and to better understand the historical, cultural and economic reasons why Australian business remains deeply unmoved by diversity, despite our much vaunted multiculturalism.

The first part of the paper charts the process of research revealing the human, emotional, technological, structural and other devices used by the government to control the researchers and their findings. This mapping elucidates different styles and levels of control as the client became more and more worried about the `output'. Desperate to capture the attention of a distinctly uninterested business audience, bureaucrats became ever more reductionist in their views about what were allowable interpretations and acceptable data.

Several key tensions emerged in this process between the client equipped with managerialist and free market economic ideology and us as researchers, intent on maintaining, not diluting our findings, and using various critical perspectives to make sense of them. These tensions included pressures to adopt a simple reading of the compelling logic of globalisation as providing the `business case', to provide practical `tool kits' which assumed the individual manager to be de-contextualised, rather than showing the impacts of broader economic and social climate on how diversity might be viewed and advocated, and pressures to depoliticise and universalize all sorts of differences under the unitary category of diversity. The research culminated in a public conference at which `new' knowledge was disseminated. The conclusion asks what legacy we left in the way of new knowledge and whether our efforts to interpose critical perspectives in the research production process altered the way diversity is understood.

Introduction

This paper describes a process of undertaking government-funded research in "productive diversity"[1] over a period of two years and ending with a public conference in December 2000. Melbourne Business School was one of nine universities and several consultant "partners" commissioned by "the Department" to undertake research in pre-defined areas of diversity.

The process, orchestrated by government through the Department, limited and disciplined the knowledge that was produced by the research. At the same time, various partners, in different ways, inserted critical perspectives into the developing understandings about diversity. The formal knowledge presented as the research output at the culminating conference was massaged into a generic message about the "business case for diversity". However, other insights, relationships and possibilities leaked out over the 18 month duration of the process to plant and feed saplings of new knowledge building – for example, exploring race and racism in Australian business. We didn't really set out to do critical research on diversity. But this became a story of our efforts to resist a rationalist managerial agenda, and the insights and perspectives we insisted on inserting are those developed in critical management theory.

The first part of the paper maps the research journey over four key episodes when the partners convened.[2] Focusing on the emotional process, I show how the fantasies of collaboration and a bountiful, all-understanding client, are under-cut as it becomes clear that it is not research that is required but evidence which would support government policy and ingratiate government with what was seen as an all-powerful business community.

In the discussion that follows, I summarise the key control tools used by the client and the various tactics of resistance used by partners. Calling us all partners was an interesting device to use at the outset as, of course, we didn't have equal power. Partners varied in their ideologies and in their capacities and willingness to resist the Department's processes of controlling the knowledge outcomes, for example by demanding re-writes of reports before money was forthcoming. One or two partners were already co-opted by business and their research consisted of testing out a "tool" which became shorter and more simplistic consistent with a prevalent view that managers attention was terribly precious and anything more than a few pages would alienate them.

While the partners demonstrated a range of responses to the Department's controls, so also the client was not a single monolithic face and the Department's position changed over time. I look in particular at the role of the charming "anchor", the Departmental multicultural boss, and Mr. Business who chaired workshops and eventually the Conference. More lowly officials voiced their support for our work and the issues we raised, but they often did so covertly.

Drawing on theoretical material, the paper asks `what is critical work' and how might it add to knowledge in this context of intrusively-funded, managerially-driven government research. I analyse a range of ideological tensions and discuss methodological tactics such as engaging research participants in the critical task, continuing to assert complexity and seeking to maximise control in reporting styles and opportunities. I conclude by arguing the subtle but significant flow on of critical insights that was among the legacies of the productive diversity program. Just as we now understand that organisational resistance can take many more forms other than overt opposition (Collinson 1994), I want to suggest that critical insights and approaches can be woven into a positivist agenda and change the knowledge some participants take away.

This paper is not a critical analysis of diversity management though that is an important undertaking (see Prasad et.al. 1997; Lorbiecki and Jack 2000; Sinclair 2000). However, the discourse of diversity is a fertile one for examining the production of knowledge. Researchers have pointed out what happens when various structurally-based differences between groups in society become relabelled as diversity. The relabelling universalizes and individualises differences, encouraging us to treat all bases of difference – from race or gender through to team style preference, as variations on a continuum. Diversity is often prefixed by "managing" or in this case, "productive" which instantly constrains legitimate diversity from that which is not managed or not productive. Drawing on critical perspectives is indispensable in exploring how new knowledge and new meanings become attached to diversity, and how diversity creates new opportunities for managerial power. Standing along the path of the diversity juggernaut, maintaining my critical perspective has felt absolutely essential.

The `Productive Diversity' Research Journey

The decision by the Department to commission research by Management Faculties and Business Schools was rooted in the arguments and findings of the Consultant's report and another by CEDA (Commission for Economic Development Australia). Both of these reports argued that issues of diversity and multiculturalism – the bread and butter issues of the Department needed to be moved out of the domain of the ethnic mafias and into the business arena.

Described as the Productive Diversity Partnership Program the research process included eight separate projects related to aspects of diversity, including a survey of CEOs and HR managers, case studies of organizational innovation and development of a diversity climate instrument. In the following discussion the research process is defined into four stages each marked by a key event or episode. I summarise the key issues occurring in the research process, but also the equally important emotional phases and the control and resistance mechanisms employed by the client and partners.

Prior to those four stages control had been exercised by the Department. The process of defining what research needed to be done and who should do it was undertaken by the Department's bureaucrats and selected academics. The facilitator was a Consultant, a senior member of one of the traditional big accounting firms moving aggressively into management consultancy and keen to establish themselves as experts in diversity. A couple of academics were already in the inner circle with the bureaucrats and managed to have projects nominated, which they were already well-placed to undertake. Already a lot of lobbying had gone on with money pledged to a couple of known "favourites", although the Department continued to be coy about how much money it was committing.

Stage 1: Partners Together: The Research Romance

The research process was "kicked off" with a workshop held in the comfortable offices of the Consultant and with plentiful coffee and gourmet catering. A full day was spent with the assembled partners getting to know one another. Each partner basked in being one of those chosen to undertake the research and they responded with a "we can do anything and everything" approach. There was infatuation and romance in the air. Everything was possible, the client was bountiful and we were part of a brave new future which would deliver new knowledge about diversity.

The partnership concept was technologically realized through “the hub”, an electronically connected network of all participants. The idea was that everybody would tell everybody else everything via this network. Shortly after the workshop, hub messages started to build up in my email. Soon, of course, hub messages came to take over in-boxes with all sorts of chatty messages and snippets of information that demonstrated how committed we were to the process of sharing information. When one partner had a baby, others competed to congratulate with the wittiest reference to productivity and diversity. At Christmas time, our in-boxes were dripping with messages of good cheer. The technological weight of collaboration rapidly started to impede our capacity to actually do the research but given the pressures to “be collaborative” it was not easy to make this distinction at the time

Stage 2: Where is the progress?: Tensions in Collaboration Nirvana

The next workshop was held three months later and already cracks were starting to show in the fantasy of collaboration and the client started moving from being unconditionally supportive to testy.

The meeting was again held in the comfortable Consultant office surrounds but the agenda was more tightly controlled by a new Chairman, a semi-retired businessman who had been involved in one of the Department’s advisory groups. The Chair positioned business as the key (and only) audience for the research and himself as the no-nonsense knower of what would wash with business (the rest of us being vague and out-of-touch academics). The Department’s pre-circulated agenda was to “structure the day” with objectives in the following order: project managers to report progress; clarify parameters, objectives and overlaps across research projects; identify “any problems or concerns so that they may be addressed in a supportive and constructive environment”.

In fact there was not much progress to report. Ours was one of only a couple of projects where any new data was offered. A particularly controversial part of our presentation was our argument that childhoods and backgrounds, including issues of parental identification, birth order, family size and structure were emerging as important influences on how open leaders were to diversity. This argument about personal and psychological factors, about the importance of personal histories, was the first of our findings to disconcert the client. They interpreted this to mean that our findings would be of little value to managers because of reduced scope to train in diversity management.

Tensions started to appear among the partners with alliances forming and loners positioning themselves. Also present were representatives from another University who clearly felt they should have been among the grant recipients. One of the partners attacked our method of in-depth interviews: “How can you say anything useful on the basis of 15 interviews?” This attack was met with some horror among the group as the first openly hostile interruption to the collaborative fantasy. When this partner presented their progress, it became clear that the intention was to adapt a generic computer program that had already been developed for another client. The group attacked this partner who was discreetly sidelined out of the process after this meeting.

Follow-up emails arrived from the Departmental anchor person – a charming and personable individual who smoothed many ruffled feathers over the research duration. These emails to me were the first signs that the research we were doing was not what they had in mind. The concerns were framed as “a few questions” including “how are you progressing in regard to defining best practice?” and “there is a question in regard to deliverables of the project. The Program has outcomes for business education curricula and business…project deliverables will have a practical use of some kind for these stakeholders…education curricula will benefit more from strategies of developing diversity leadership qualities rather than only recognizing antecedent factors in individuals past lives.”

Stage 3 : In Search of the Non-existent `Business Case for Diversity’

Five months later, the partners met again, this time at Melbourne Business School. The Consultant took a low profile with the workshop chaired by Mr. Business. According to the contracts, final reports were to be submitted by now though it became clear that most had not been completed.

By this time the Department was starting to be preoccupied with the planned culmination of the research process, a conference, at which research findings were to be presented. The workshop agenda called for “brief” progress reports and “outline of any steps to finalise your project”: in other words we weren’t to say much about our work. Partners were to present using a powerpoint template created by the Department’s designers to give consistency and “professionalism” to presentations (see later discussion on Control Tools). We were also subject to a patronizing fire-side chat by the Chair, in effect a lecture on how to improve our presentation skills. This was ironic given that he was probably the most inarticulate speaker among us. The main subject for discussion was marketing the conference with the Department maintaining with some desperation that “the most effective marketing of the conference will be through the partners as they are closer to the market than the Department is”.

At this workshop it became clear that the Department didn’t want research on diversity – it wanted “the business case”, that is, evidence from the research that managing diversity delivered a bottom-line benefit. As each partner presented, more gaps in the departmental vision emerged: there was no business case, there was no final and single definition of diversity, diversity as it was used in organizations did not comfortably encompass gender or race – in fact race and experiences of indigenous employees were not on the radar of managers thinking about diversity. Research findings starkly showed not much diversity innovation was happening in organizations and, dramatically, managers didn’t care if they were doing nothing about diversity – they were by and large satisfied to be doing nothing and resisted the suggestion of government intervention.

Our presentation sought to unpack some of these findings arguing that macro political, economic and social factors must be included to explain why few cared about diversity. We also mapped all the pressures on people from different racial and ethnic backgrounds to assimilate and not identify themselves with diversity. Another partner involved in case studies also spent time talking about the obstacles to and the sensitivity about diversity among their organizational participants but this analysis was cut short by the Chair and thereafter this partner was characterized as too extreme in their views and not able to tailor their material to a business audience.

While most participants in the workshop seemed interested in this more encompassing analysis of diversity's failure, Mr Business and the Consultant took control. In the last session of the day the Consultant returned from afternoon tea, whiteboard marker in hand and determined to apply a grid of findings across all projects. Using the pre-defined standardized headings, the Consultant worked his way around the partners forcing them to fill in their grid. The most obliging worked hard to comply but our spokesperson argued she couldn't do it and the exercise wasn't useful. This was the catalyst for others to revolt. In the end, a relatively new partner suggested that everyone supply a one page summary under standardized headings. The partners had resisted playing in the grid, but the Department got what it wanted (even if the Consultant didn't) – a single page of dot points under generic headings.

Subsequent emails from partners attempted to respond to other Departmental concerns such as the need for consistency of definition. For example, the partner responsible for an overview of the state of diversity practice offered a lengthy definition of diversity. This elicited not unity of definition, but a fresh outburst of disagreement and discontent. Nobody wanted one partner to provide the final definition for everybody and many of us argued this would not serve a useful purpose. In the end, partners ignored the demand for definitional consistency.

Phase 4 : Increasing Control and New Disciplines in Conference lead-up

Several events preceded the final Conference six months later. An Academics Conference was organized by the Department to involve the academics who had been excluded from the Partnerships Program. These included several who had worked with the Department in the past but were identified too much with the multicultural "mafia" and not with business. The purpose of this seemed to be to ensure these academics were 'on-side' and would not use the conference as an opportunity to condemn the commissioned research.

About a month before the conference date, I and two other partners were invited to a Confidential Pre-conference Briefing. We were those chosen to address the whole conference rather than workshops and this was the department's way of seeking to control what we had to say. Although the conference was to "showcase research outcomes", it sat within a "policy framework" and "it is important for you to be aware of this framework so that the conference presents a unity of thought and intention" . The primary objective was to present a business case for diversity management and I was equipped with a suggested dot-point outline of my address.

As the conference drew near we were flooded with instructions and requests for outlines and copies of our talks, that grew less chatty and more directive. After requesting suggestions, the Department opted for the conference title of "21st Century

Business” – a generic title which gave away nothing about the specific content. Diversity was hidden in the subhead: “Delivering the Diversity Dividend”.

All conference powerpoint presentations were to use the standard template which on first design was so cumbersome (see later discussion). Several partners had been left out of the formal proceedings or confined to marginal roles and these included those who were seen to have a more radical feminist agenda. The conference sponsor was the firm of the Consultant and they negotiated a very prominent role as Chair of each session. The Workshop Session structure allowed little time for partner research and lots of opportunities for controlling and “branding” the message.

Consultant Chair introduces speaker

20 mins Speaker address

20 mins Chair opens question time

10 mins Chair clarified main points with speakers and summarises.

Immediately post-workshop, speakers, Chairs and a Departmental representative were to liaise about key points presented – by the Chairs – at plenary sessions.

The Conference went smoothly enough although most of the partners felt overtaken and a bit sidelined by the Departmental juggernaut. An exception was one partner who, it was announced in the last session, had been designated to carry the research forward to the next stage to develop management curriculum materials and was awarded roughly the total amount that had been shared between the partners. Predictably this action united the rest of the partners in disgust and attack of this individual who was interpreted as using his personal relationship to the Chair to get preferential treatment.

In my address I ignored instructions and continued to argue that one had to understand diversity management in its wider context in order to understand why the business case had failed to attract significant interest or resources. I argued that focusing exclusively on the business case ignored that managers did or did not pursue values such as diversity for more complex reasons. Other partners in different ways resisted the Departmental script. Dissenting insights and evidence were inserted into presentations. In a very compelling address one partner did two things – he meticulously linked in some of the research that had been marginalized by the Department and he also talked about the impact of his own privilege (as a white anglo male) working in the area of diversity. In its strategies of explicit inclusion and personalization this presentation subverted the Departmental template of what was business-like.

I wondered whether we had been excluded from further research funding because I had refused to do as instructed, but it emerged later that the decision about who was to be re-funded had been taken well before the Conference.

Departmental Control Mechanisms

Overall there were many devices used to control the partners and their research including obvious mechanisms such as withholding committed funds until the reporting was in an approved form. In this section, I outline two sets of control mechanisms which are subtle but powerful, one to do with the Department’s agents and one set which flowed from the implementation of technology. The first set of controls was effective initially because of our own desires to please, the second set diverted our energies into complying with technologies rather than asking what was a legitimate contribution.

The Business Chairman

The business Chair was interposed, or interposed himself, very early in the research process. Establishing himself as the voice of business, he consistently argued that “he knew what executives/CEOs would read”. This claim to be the only reader and interpreter of what was acceptable to business, was used to achieve a number of ends. First, it was used to reduce, simplify, in effect, “dumb down” what could be offered as findings. The Chair’s reading was also an important part of supplanting research findings with the single message – that diversity was good for business’ bottom-line. Arguments that it was our role to expand the level of understanding of diversity’s organizational impacts, fell on deaf ears.

The Chair’s reading of business was used to declare some research `not legitimate’ to be presented at the conference because it wouldn’t be valued by business. This condemnation applied particularly to two university-based partners who were both all female teams (with a track record of consulting to business). However, they consistently raised structural issues of discrimination and concerns that gender didn’t fit comfortably into the diversity framework

It was also under the influence of the Business Chair, in cohort with the Consultant, that all research was framed under pre-defined and generic headings, such as business case points. the partners reports were supposed to look the same. The standardization of research occurred via vehicles such as executive summaries: “executives only read the summaries” we were told. At the second workshop in the last session, the Consultant leaped to his feet and laid out a matrix on the whiteboard within which all research was to be subsumed. Although the partners initially went along with this, as soon as one of our team voiced discomfort with the process, the rest started to oppose it.

The Departmental Anchor

Interactions between the Department and partners was managed by a charming bureaucrat whose voice and manner made him a delight to deal with. All of the partners, in different ways, felt they had a “special” understanding with the Anchor, that their needs would receive special attention. His email communication was friendly (“Hi all”) and inclusive which made us all feel like part of one big happy family.

Often his friendly email would preface a much more stern formal letter that arrived, on letterhead, from the Boss. The anchor massaged most of us into a state of complicity and even after the conference, he managed to de-fuse the rage and discontent many felt that only one partner (and undoubtedly the least deserving!) had been re-funded in a very generous way.

The Multicultural Boss

The most senior Departmental bureaucrat to attend workshops was a relatively silent but all-powerful presence. She left the obvious work of controlling the partners and workshops to the Chair, Consultant and Anchor and did most of the business of interacting directly with partners in hushed conversations in corners and personal conversations. We developed over time a relationship of trust whereby she provided extra funds and I did, what seemed to be judged as research. However, things became more tense as on a number of public occasions discussing the research, I insisted that focusing only on the business case would not produce change – that we needed to understand why diversity was resisted. When she said afterwards "You are very honest Amanda" – I knew this was effectively the end of our relationship.

Powerpoint Templates

After the second workshop and with the conference looming partners were emailed a centrally-designed powerpoint template. The template was black and grey with lines like sonar waves across the background – chosen, one supposes to represent business and `high tech' in the "21st century" (Attachment A). The template created several problems that offer interesting insights on control. The first draft was so complicated and took up so much byte space, the empty template itself, let alone the presentation, couldn't fit on a disk. This created a problem for partners who would normally bring disks to load onto the central computer for presentations. The hugely cumbersome template, enslaved many research partners to their computers while they desperately tried to work with it. When I pointed out the problem I was reassured by the Anchor that my disk must be faulty. Eventually after complaints from other partners, they sent it back to the designers to simplify but not after a number of us had gone to the extra trouble of having powerpoint documents "zipped" or emailed.

In the first dry run of Mark 2 of the template – it became obvious that it was very cluttered visually. In the first draft, the logos of all supporting companies sat down the left side of each slide with sonar waves and sponsor logos, but it was clear that style and the business support were the main message. There was so much decoration that only a minute amount of information could be presented under dot point headings. The font was also shadowed and was white on a dark background which meant that the text was invisible as it was being written or edited.

All of these technically-mediated difficulties were frustrating and time-wasting but the most restrictive aspect was how the format of three dot points was hostile to presentation of other possibilities – longer quotes, graphic models, pictures. When our text was squeezed into this template, it was changed and reduced.

The hub and instructional emails

The hub was a network of email addresses, ostensibly to ensure that we all knew what everyone else was doing and would avoid overlaps and duplications in our research. The hub controlled research in several ways. First it established a very high standard of email communication whereby the best researchers were those who dutifully participated in exchange of information and feedback on other people's suggestions. The effect was to cram in-boxes with emails which made everyone feel involved but reduced research progress.

Around the time of the second workshop relations between partners were more tense. The Department had clearly decided on its favourites and some partners were feeling disgruntled and pressured to do more work to get documents to conform.

Crunch time came when draft surveys and reports started to be put on the hub and not surprisingly these circulated documents generated considerable attack and counter-attack.

By closer to the Conference, the hub had been abandoned in favour of more customized emails and communication between partners was minimal. Several emails from the client basically instructed us what to say at the conference. The instructions make no connection to the content or findings of the research. The client wanted us to use the platform of the conference to make `the business case' for diversity, regardless of what our findings had been or how many times before the business case had been ignored.

Two Ideologies: the Department's "policy framework" and our critical perspective

In this section I describe the Departmental ideology underpinning productive diversity and lay out the ways we sought to interpose critical perspectives (see Table 1). Several key tensions emerged between the client equipped with rationalist free market economic ideology and us as researchers, intent on maintaining, not adapting or diluting, our findings and using a critical framework to make sense of them.

Asserting the use of a critical framework is not an uncontroversial claim, particularly in a paper that lacks the theoretical references that become default "critical markers" (Fournier and Grey 2000). Reynolds (1999) summarises four principles of critical reflection which include a commitment to questioning assumptions in theory and practice; foregrounding power and ideology, a social more than individual perspective; and an agenda of working towards just and moral ends. Lorbiecki and Jacks refers to Thomas' (1993) work defining the features of criticality: "achieved if management is understood in its wider context, assumptions are identified and challenged, awareness is developed of alternative ways of doing things and by being more sceptical about what is presented in management dogma" (2000: S22). Perriton (2000) also emphasizes the recognition of power and the power of economic and political forces to constrain individual agency.

In their comprehensive analysis Alvesson and Deetz (2000) describe three tasks of critical management research which emphasise not just reflective and intellectual processes but intervention to elicit "meaningful change in the micro-practices at the innumerable sites of power relations" (2000:20). Their first task is to foster insight often using interpretive methods which take the native's point of view seriously. The second is to provide critique which includes naming taken-for-granted ideologies and putting the object of study within its wider context of power relations. The third task, which takes the critical research management agenda further is transformative redefinition which develops new knowledge aimed at enabling change to more democratic and less repressive forms: "the production and distribution of a different kind of political competence" (2000: 20).

While it would be untrue to maintain that we set out with these intents, the principles and perspectives of critical theory rapidly became essential to us in both providing insight to our findings, in resisting the simplistic departmental dogma and in maintaining the complexity and integrity of what we thought was worth saying about diversity.

Five aspects of a critical framework were particularly important in our work:

-contesting the idea of the agent manager who could be considered outside of their economic, cultural and political context

-dissecting the sources of resistance to diversity

-challenging the rationalist orthodoxy that if you made the rational case for diversity then managers would automatically fall into line

-going deeper into the backgrounds of leaders to show how openness to diversity is not a set of instant competencies or capabilities but the product of a life history

-contesting the reductionist view that business was only interested in a 1-page bottom-line message and insisting that managers would respond to more complex knowledge about diversity

1.The Department's ideology rested on the assumption that managers being shown the financial benefits of embracing diversity would change their behaviour and values. This rationalist view reduced all motivation to economic motivation. Our findings were that economic logic would not simply overturn structural and psychological resistances to greater diversity in organizations. We questioned the assumption that rationality always prevailed in business decision-making and argued that managerial subjectivities were important in explaining resistance.

There were also pressures to adopt a simple reading of globalisation as providing diversity management logic: that globalisation of business and markets were inevitable and utilizing staff from multicultural backgrounds would unlock new business markets. There was no recognition of the way in which labour markets and particularly managerial job markets are segregated to exclude those from non-Anglo backgrounds. Drawing on some of the immigration and labour markets research, as well as Bourdieu's work we sought to show the overwhelming importance of having the right "cultural capital" to enter and progress in the managerial job market.

Another set of tensions emerged around the (invented?) imperative to turn research into "tool kits" and "off the shelf" curriculum materials which would be, it was assumed, instantly useable and used by managers. The Department is continuing to act as if the problem of a failure to engage with diversity lies in the lack of curriculum materials for management education or appropriate tools for managers. Again, we argued in our reports and presentations, a pre-requisite is understanding why and how diversity issues have failed to gain legitimacy in managerial and wider public discourse.

Our desire to hold on to complexity in the face of continued reductionism also applied to the diversity category itself. One of our findings which we hadn't expected was the emerging evidence that leaders who are open to cultural diversity are not necessarily open to greater gender diversity. Where the Department kept arguing the need to have a single overarching definition of diversity, we referred to the hierarchies within diversity and cautioned against a single approach to diversity management. Strategies that might improve the organisational climate for racial minorities might not automatically improve it for women and vice versa.

Our focus was diversity leadership – the habits and capabilities of leaders in working with difference. Our belief was that a deeper analysis of fewer leaders, and not necessarily those seen as exemplars of diversity leadership, would be necessary to gain insight into why it is that some leaders are threatened by difference and others are open to it. Yet our methodology came under fire even though the Department found our style of reporting with extended direct quotes very absorbing. In the end the Department promoted the partner who had used a survey, the results of which, on close analysis, undermined the business case.

Critical perspectives and knowledge creation

The focus of this Conference stream is how critical research influences knowledge production. How did the tensions between the Department and the researchers shape the knowledge that was produced? Were the range of controls invoked by the Department sufficient to quarantine allowable knowledge to the "business case for diversity"? Is knowledge about diversity any different as a result and whose knowledge has changed?

Answering these questions requires a notion of knowledge and a framework which recognizes the practices by which knowledge is produced. According to Foucault (1972), knowledge comes with discursive practices and a group of subjects occupying, and contesting, discursive space. Discursive practices are not co-existent with a discipline (such as management) but far outreach it. In this view language and power produce knowledge, not the other way around. An analysis of the discursive practices underpinning the productive diversity process would provide rich insights into how ideas and experiences of difference are transformed and overtaken by narratives of managerial and economic ideology, as well as politically-loaded discourses such as multiculturalism (see for example, Hage 1998).

My desire here is to venture a more modest discussion about the will to create meaning and how critical insights informed the desire to find new meanings around issues of diversity, despite and alongside the controls of the formal research production process. I don't believe that the productive diversity research process produced much in the way of new knowledge, though the intent was nakedly to give diversity business legitimacy. Of more interest to me are the meaning-creating activities in which partners engaged : as Parker describes it "the sub-universe of meaning that you hold in your hand" (2000:217).

I consider first the official research output that was disseminated through the public conference. In the second part of this discussion, I look at the changes in understandings and meanings that arose from the more personal and interactive parts of the process - from the relationships, discussions and boundary-pushing that sprung up on the edge of the formal process, in opposition to the agenda and in spite of the Department's best efforts.

At the conference a full half-day was devoted to `Diversity Leadership' a term (we (believe) we coined for our research. Linking diversity and leadership was a well-considered tactic (Sinclair 2000): as Sennett argues, leader is "the most cunning word in the modern management lexicon" (1998: 111). I was seeking to turn the focus and responsibility for diversity management from minority groups to dominant groups. In the sense that our research resulted in “diversity leadership” becoming used as a term and discussed more widely, we have been involved in knowledge creation.

This carries mixed feelings for me. We may have created an idea – that there is such a thing as diversity leadership that is worth talking about and aspiring to – but that idea was instantly out of our control to be used in ways that government and others, see fit. The government wanted us to tell people how to do diversity leadership and give `best practice’ examples. We sought to use the opportunity to describe the complex structural – economic and political - and psychological barriers to enacting diversity leadership. “Diversity Leadership” has entered the lexicon beyond the Conference. It is the title of this year’s annual Australian conference which normally goes under the heading of “Women, Management and Employee Relations”. Diversity Leadership here is being used to give women’s issues sexier and wider appeal. I worried to see what felt like “my term” used in a forum where I won’t have a chance to describe what I mean by it. Had I created a monster?

There were numerous follow-ups to the conference – requests from attendees for us to speak at various multicultural awareness raising events. Most of these I declined, not wanting to get further co-opted into a pushing a diversity barrow that to me had become emptied of meaning. Another conference was held on diversity two months later and a team of wild horses wouldn’t have got me there.

The Department seems remarkably unchanged. The anchorperson has been moved on to troubleshoot somewhere else. The research has been carried on by another bureaucrat, new to the field, who has drafted a tender for people like me to deliver `curriculum materials’ for management education. So, once again, the managing diversity task is being de-politicised, seen as a matter of designing suitable materials rather than asking why diversity is not on the business or management education agenda at all. The Department also wheeled me out for an Olympics event in Sydney to showcase some of the work the government was doing on diversity. This flattered me into thinking they recognized my work as special. My naïve self thought I would be rewarded for doing research which sought to explain things with reference to a deeper, wider analysis than that which I was hired to do.

Turning to the new meanings and ideas that have accrued for me, my research colleagues and interviewees, other partners in the productive diversity program and indirectly to the students and audiences we work with, then it feels like we are all operating with a much deeper, better-grounded and more critical understanding of how diversity sits in the landscape of management knowledge and practice. The research process has changed how I think, work and teach, as well as who I talk to, on a wider front than diversity. It has prompted me to reflect on my work in gender and write about my role in, and collusion with, perpetuation of the diversity discourse (Sinclair 2000). I now come at diversity from a different place and with different intentions. Partially as a result of this experience and the fact that we could find no indigenous senior managers to include in our sample, I am now undertaking research on aboriginal leadership.

Most of the leaders we interviewed obviously enjoyed the process of thinking about their experiences of difference. This catalyzing of their thinking was a deliberate part of our research intervention and our method validated and encouraged them to interpret subjective experience. We wanted to get working with difference on the leadership radar screen and we wanted to get them to connect it to their personal experience – successes as well as failures. I have spoken to a couple subsequently and there seems greater readiness to "come out" about the ethnocentrism and racism that is prevalent in business. The interview process itself helped some to talk about personal experiences of discrimination which they had hidden away but could not see were legitimate areas of managerial concern. In some ofthese one-on-one examples, it feels as though we got leaders thinking about difference with new levels of consciousness and in a more systemic way.

My co-researcher and I enjoyed the field work for the research and are turning our findings into a book. It was provisionally titled "Diversity Leadership" but now we have both rejected that term, thinking of it as our "anti-hero" book. Our research confirmed for me many of the limitations of the diversity framework which others had explored (for example Prasad et.al. 1997; Linnehan and Konrad 1999). I have subsequently written more about these issues (Sinclair 2000) and incorporated them into my teaching and research. I extracted some of our findings on race and wrote a piece for the magazine published by our financial newspaper about our findings. The editor headed this "Race around the office" (Sinclair 2001), which I felt nervous about precisely because racism is such a taboo subject in Australian business and society. I have had supportive feedback about this article from managers who work, for example, on improving employment prospects for indigenous people. As another example, I was invited to submit a paper to a journal published by one of the partners. That paper influenced other partners research and was re-produced in the magazine section of the Australian Financial Review. I subsequently used it in my teaching and a number of students reported that it changed the way they thought about leadership.

The research process created a structure in which partners developed relationships and created alliances with all our practices in teaching and research of diversity changing as a result. One long-term diversity teacher, now includes work on masculinities and introduces his own experiences of racism in his teaching. Another, funded by the Department, did work on "white men's issues" in the US and these experiences infuse themselves into his consulting. New relationships were formed, for example, with a medical researcher redesigning undergraduate medical education around principles of cross-cultural awareness. I have been invited to lead a workshop discussion on my work on masculinities by another research partner. These examples are evidence of significant widening of the knowledge-in-practice in diversity from doing new work, sharing insights and taking courage from each other's innovation. The content of our discussion space around diversity has broadened to include issues such as structural conditions, to help explain why diversity fails to move managers. Knowledge production is too big a label to apply to these subtle and incremental shifts in alliances and discourses. At the same time, I want to argue that they are the mechanisms through which critical perspectives can stretch and subvert the dominant managerial ideology on diversity.

Conclusion

Bringing a critical perspective exposes what is often confronting and deeply dispiriting – the intractability of vested interests, structural inertia, the endemic nature of injustice and the ingenuity with which we all prop up our own world views. As Foucault wryly concludes many of us find it difficult enough to recognize that our history and social practices are governed by rules outside of consciousness. We do not want to "be deprived of that tender consoling certainty of being able to change, if not the world, if not life, at least (our) "meaning", simply with a fresh word that can come only from (ourselves)" (1972:211).

Teaching a critical understanding of gender relations often makes students (women as well as men) murderous towards you – certainly initially at least, they rarely thank you for seeing the entrenchment of structural relationships. The Department didn't thank me for exposing a bigger picture on diversity although they were fleetingly titillated by interesting interview data and at one point the Anchor said to me with some relief : "Oh! so you are using that post-structural approach – I studied that at uni. so know all about that".

The Department described what we were doing as new research on productive diversity. Did it constitute knowledge-building or were we simply elaborating a discursive regime outside our consciousness or control? Our desire to assert critical perspectives certainly escalated as the Department's censoring hand became heavier. It might be argued that we were not really doing critical research but a mixture of spasmodic subversion and a rear-guard refusal to stop inserting ideas and evidence that we knew were unpalatable. We were nibbling and chewing the hand that fed us even if we didn't bite it off. Despite the obstacles, for many of us involved, diversity won't ever be the same again and that, surely, is a good thing.

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Table 1: Two Ideologies on Diversity

The Department	Critical Perspectives
showing managers financial benefits of diversity will change behaviours	political, economic and social factors create context in which people act
business decision-making is rational response to changing conditions	business decision-making often driven by political, personal interest:
globalisation provides compelling logic for diversity	international and immigrant labour markets segregated to exclude non-Anglos from managerial roles
diversity is a unitary condition	not all diversities are equal
diversity management a single solution	solutions have multiple and conflicting effects on structural disadvantage e.g. multicultural initiatives won't necessarily benefit women & vice versa
diversity can be managed by managers	need to problematise who is designated diverse and what are the characteristics ofthose who do the managing
obstacle to better diversity managt is lack of info and curricula	resistance to differences are structurally and personally anchored
adding in new info.on diversity will change management education	diversity a marginalised area of management curricula – a problem of legitimacy, not materials
individual managers can be taught to be diversity managers by adding knowledge about others &	managerial openness to diversity a product of life experiences, help managers understand selves to learn about

skills	their response to “others” and difference

[1] Productive diversity was a term coined by a previous Aust. Prime Minister to convey the economic benefits that would accrue from utilization of Australia’s multicultural population and workforce.

[2] My analysis is based on my reflections and notes I made at the time and is inevitably subjective though I have shared and received comment from two other partners. It is, of course, unlikely that the official face of the Department would agree with my construction of events.

Source: http://www.mngt.waikato.ac.nz/ 2001