



## **Diversity as Polyphony**

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**Diversity as Polyphony: Reconceptualizing Diversity Management  
From A Communication-Centered Perspective**

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**Diversity as Polyphony: Reconceptualizing Diversity Management**  
**From a Communication-Centered Perspective**

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**Abstract**

In this paper, we propose reconceptualizing diversity management from a communication-centered perspective. Our proposal is based on the observation that the literature on diversity management, both in the instrumental and critical traditions, is primarily concerned with fostering the diversity of organizational members in terms of individual-bound criteria (e.g., gender, age, or ethnicity). By drawing on Bakhtin's notion of polyphony as well as the 'communicative constitution of organizations' (CCO) perspective, we suggest reconsidering diversity as the plurality of 'voices', that is, the range of individual opinions and societal discourses that become expressed and can find resonance in organizational settings. We contribute to the literature on diversity management by moving away from a focus on individual-bound and inalterable criteria of diversity and towards a reconceptualization of diversity management as dynamic processes of voice articulation and mediation.

**Keywords**

Bakhtin; 'communicative constitution of organizations' (CCO); diversity management; organizational communication; polyphony

## Introduction

In 2009, the Dutch telecommunications company KPN adopted a policy that prioritized women as candidates for top management positions (Dutchnews.nl, 2014). Flouting this policy was penalized: for example, KPN managers who did not hire women suffered a reduction in their bonuses. Recently, however, KPN publicly abolished this policy. The firm reported that the women hired were ultimately very similar to their male counterparts in terms of their skill sets, capacities, career paths, and educational backgrounds. Because of the high degree of similarity, according to KPN's management, the measure did not fulfill its purpose, which was to increase the diversity of the workforce and allow different viewpoints and work styles to vitalize the corporation (Dutchnews.nl, 2014).

As the KPN case demonstrates, measurements to increase workforce diversity in terms of predefined, individual-bound, and largely inalterable characteristics of differences between human beings (see also Tatli and Özbilgin, 2012) cannot guarantee that novel and alternative viewpoints get expressed and find resonance in organizational settings. Existing literatures on diversity management offer only limited guidance in this matter. On the one hand, diversity management research in the 'instrumental' tradition (e.g., Cox and Blake, 1991; Robinson and Dechant, 1997; Scott et al., 2011) is concerned with how organizations can manage the diversity of organizational members along sociodemographic criteria (e.g., gender, age, or ethnicity) in order to gain competitive advantage and enhance team performance (an approach that the KPN example renders questionable). On the other hand, diversity management research in the 'critical' tradition draws on normative arguments to stress the importance of workforce diversity, for instance, based on ideals of social justice and social representation (e.g., Van Dijk et al., 2012). At the same time, works in the critical tradition also highlight the challenges, tensions, and contradictions of realizing those ideals in organizational practice (e.g., Bissett, 2004; Kalonaityte, 2009; Kirton and Greene, 2009; Riach, 2009).

Despite these different orientations, both traditions of diversity management research are united by their focus on the organization's workforce, i.e. how to diversify the population of individual human members. However, this focus precludes from acknowledging that also non-members can significantly contribute to an organization's diversity. Thus, in this paper, we develop the argument that diversity management research and practice can benefit from being complemented by a communication-centered perspective. More specifically, by drawing on the work of Bakhtin (1984; Carter and Clegg, 2003; Hazen, 1993; Kornberger et al., 2006) and the emerging 'communicative constitution of organizations' (CCO) perspective (Ashcraft et al., 2009; Brummans et al., 2014; Cooren et al., 2011), we propose the reconceptualization of diversity as the plurality of 'voices', that is, the range of individual opinions and societal discourses that become expressed and can find resonance in organizational settings. Importantly, in line with Bakhtin (1984), we understand voices as existing partly independent from specific individuals; in other words, one and the same voice can be expressed by different individuals and through one and the same individual multiple voices can become expressed (see also Belova et al., 2008; Belova, 2010; Pietikäinen and Dufva, 2006). Our conceptual inquiry is guided by the following question: What are the implications for diversity management when the goal switches from a diversification of the workforce along individual-bound criteria (such as gender, age, or ethnicity) towards a diversification of voices that get expressed and/or find resonance in organizational settings?

With regards to the instrumental tradition, we argue that the switch of focus to the diversity of voices allows diversity management to tap into the potential for innovation, creativity, and change that lies in the communicative appreciation of otherness (see also Bassett-Jones, 2005). With regards to the critical tradition, we posit that a communication-centered approach can pave the way to a different kind of social representation: not in the sense of social representation of certain groups of individuals (in terms of individual-bound,

sociodemographic criteria) but in the sense of a representation of societal voices and discourses in organizational settings (what we suggest to term ‘discursive diversity’<sup>1</sup>). Switching to voices as the main focus of diversity management thus can help account for the fundamental embeddedness of organizations in a ‘networked society’ (Schultz et al., 2013).

Our contributions to the existing literature on diversity management and communication are threefold: first, we contribute to diversity management research by extending the idea of diversity towards communicative plurality. Importantly, by switching the focus to the diversification of (organizational and contextual) voices, our approach allows for reconciling the idea that diversity is necessary for innovation and change (one key focus in the instrumental tradition) with normative considerations on inclusion and social representation (one key focus in the critical-tradition). Second, our reconceptualization of diversity management draws attention to importance of contextual voices as sources of diversity (i.e. voices that become articulated in society-at-large). In this regard, our paper helps consider diversity management as an important part of corporate social responsibility (CSR) which similarly demands from organizations to consider broader societal discourses and stakeholder relations (e.g., Maak and Pless, 2006; Matten and Moon, 2004; Scherer and Palazzo, 2007). Finally, we also contribute to CCO as a theoretical endeavor (Ashcraft et al., 2009). We demonstrate fruitful cross-connections of the CCO perspective with other works that highlight the multi-voiced character of organizations (Belova et al., 2008; Hazen, 1993) and the organizational need for practicing polyphonic dialogues in day-to-day organizing (Pless, 1998, 1999). By relying on Bakhtin-inspired dialogism (Bakhtin, 1984; Shotter, 2008), we furthermore help further unpack the ethical implications of the CCO perspective (see also Scherer and Rasche, forthcoming).

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<sup>1</sup> The term ‘discursive diversity’ is not entirely new but has been used in other contexts before. For instance, Flores and McPhail (1997) draw on the same term in the area of media studies for critically discussing the role of mass media in contributing to the social construction of (individual human) differences.

## **Literature Review on Diversity Management and Communication**

The field of diversity management comprises a rich body of research that is part of the even larger, cross-disciplinary field of diversity research. Diversity management research includes studies from the areas of human resource management (e.g., Alcázar et al., 2013; Bell et al., 2011; Scott et al., 2011), innovation management (e.g., Bassett-Jones, 2005), or organization and management studies more generally (e.g., Cox and Blake, 1991; Francoeur et al., 2007; Siciliano, 1996). Comprehensive overviews on the subject can be found in various recent special issues of academic journals (e.g., Metcalfe and Woodhams, 2012; Nishii and Özbilgin, 2007; Zanoni et al., 2010). In the following literature review, we present and analyze the two primary streams of research on diversity management: the instrumental and the critical tradition. An exhaustive review of the vast field of diversity management is beyond the scope and the goal of this paper. Instead, in line with our theoretical focus, our literature review is guided by the question how existing works on diversity management understand communication and how these studies can contribute to a communication-centered understanding of diversity management.

### **Instrumental Perspectives on Diversity Management**

A significant stream of scholarship on diversity management examines how organizations can use diversity instrumentally in order to gain competitive advantage and enhance organizational or team performance (e.g., Cox and Blake, 1991; Labucay, 2015; Robinson and Dechant, 1997; Scott et al., 2011). Researchers following the ‘instrumental’ tradition (Janssens and Zanoni, 2005) tend to conceptualize diversity as the *difference* between individuals. Although this generic conceptualization of diversity can apply in principle to “any attribute that may evoke the perception that the other person is different from the self” (Guillaume et al., 2013, p. 124; see also Van Knippenberg and Schippers, 2007; Williams and

O'Reilly, 1998), theoretical models of diversity management in this tradition tend to rely primarily on sociodemographic attributes such as gender, age, or ethnicity (e.g., Cox and Blake, 1991; Cox, 1991; Gilbert and Ivancevich, 2000; Ivancevich and Gilbert, 2000).

The aim of scholars following the instrumental tradition is “to get diversity at work to work” (Guillaume et al., 2013, p. 124). Accordingly, various empirical studies investigate how organizations can establish formal programs that enable them to manage workforce diversity most effectively and generate competitive advantage (e.g., Cox and Blake, 1991; Milliken and Martins, 1996; Wright et al., 1995). These ‘toolkits’ typically include specific human resource management (HRM) practices such as recruitment, training, leadership, or mentoring programs (e.g., Alcázar et al., 2013; Gilbert et al., 1999; Ivancevich and Gilbert, 2000; Kulik, 2014; Roberson et al., 2001). On the whole, these studies regard organizations as capable of strategically implementing structures, processes, and policies in order to leverage the ‘business case’ of diversity (Labucay, 2015; Robinson and Dechant, 1997).

Most works in the instrumental tradition propose that communication either supports or interferes with the positive influence of diversity management on organizational performance (e.g., Ayoko, 2007). More precisely, communication is viewed here primarily as a factor that moderates the influence of diversity on performance (e.g., Ashkanasy et al., 2002; Ayoko, 2007; Findler et al., 2007; Grimes and Richard, 2003). For instance, some scholars suggest that organizations should encourage ‘cosmopolitan communication’ (Grimes and Richard, 2003) and thus demonstrate their appreciation of the differences between individuals in order to sustain competitive advantage (e.g., Grimes and Richard, 2003). Other scholars recommend that organizations should create environments in which ‘diverse’ employees (e.g., in terms of ethnic background) feel safe and are encouraged to speak their mind, because this will induce them to contribute subsequently to the organization’s success by doing more than their role prescriptions require (Singh et al., 2013). Further empirical studies imply that a favorable



organizational culture, or ‘climate’ (Cox Edmondson et al., 2009), in which the value of diversity is addressed, increases employee satisfaction and commitment and leads to desirable outcomes for the organization (e.g., Cox Edmondson et al., 2009; Groggins and Ryan, 2013; Nelson and Wolf, 2012). Thus, creating favorable communicative situations is viewed here as key to unleash the productive effects of diversity in organizational settings (e.g., Grimes and Richard, 2003; Naff and Kellough, 2003).

Notwithstanding the merits of the instrumental perspective on diversity management (especially its guidance in the application of these practices for business purposes), we should note that works in this tradition tend to portray communication as a unidirectional, controllable, and linear process through which the organization transmits information to its constituents (for a critical review of this notion of communication, see Axley, 1984). For instance, Barker and Gower (2010) suggest that organizations should utilize practices of storytelling as a communication tool to strategically persuade heterogeneous audiences across the organization. More broadly, research on instrumental diversity management seems to be grounded in the underlying assumption that the organization is in control of its communication, including what information is transmitted and how audiences will receive it. At the same time, most of these studies imply a ‘container’ metaphor of organization in the sense that they conceive of organizations as distinct entities in which communication processes occur. These assumptions, however, tend to neglect the fundamental, constitutive, and formative role of communication for organizations (Cooren et al., 2011).

Recent, practitioner-oriented works in the instrumental tradition have drawn attention to new and alterable dimensions of diversity (e.g., Helgesen, 2014). For instance, as Freeman (2014) reports, some corporations have taken measurements to diversify their workforce with respect to dynamic and alterable criteria such as work styles or value orientations. This development in organizational practice corresponds with a more general trend in the academic literature to

draw on more fine-grained conceptualizations of diversity and to investigate the effects of diversified value orientations (e.g., Eastman and Santoro, 2003), work styles (e.g., Shelton et al., 2002), or educational backgrounds (e.g., Kearney et al., 2009) on organizational performance. We consider these works as useful first steps towards a reconceptualization of diversity management based on alterable and dynamic criteria of diversity.

### **Critical Perspectives on Diversity Management**

In contrast to the instrumental tradition, other scholars have proposed a critical approach that takes into account the inherently contested and political character of the concept of diversity management (e.g., Metcalfe and Woodhams, 2012; Syed and Özbilgin, 2009; Tatli, 2011; Tatli and Özbilgin, 2012; Zanoni et al., 2010). Within the critical tradition, we can broadly distinguish between, on the one hand, ‘radical-critical’ works which tend to reject the manageability of diversity in organizational settings (e.g., Bissett, 2004; Kalonaityte, 2009; Swan, 2009) and, on the other hand, ‘constructive-critical’ works which follow a more modest approach. These latter works aim to reconcile the critical with the instrumental perspective to some degree by proposing diversity management approaches that are both economically successful and socially just (e.g., Janssens and Zanoni, 2014; Jonsen et al., 2013; Nishii and Özbilgin, 2007).

In the ‘radical-critical’ stream of the literature, some scholars fundamentally contest the business rationale of diversity management and the underlying assumption that human diversity would be *manageable* (e.g., Zanoni et al., 2010). In this stream of the literature, organizations are understood as political systems that tend to reproduce social injustice (Adler et al., 2007) by systematically disadvantaging, under-representing, or silencing organizational members such as women, ethnic minorities, or homosexuals (e.g., Bell et al., 2011; Kamenou and Fearfull, 2006; Litvin, 1997). In the same line of thinking, scholars emphasize that the

term ‘diversity management’ rhetorically obscures injustice in organizational settings, without addressing contextual conditions of power, privilege, inequality, and disadvantage (e.g., Bissett, 2004; Kirby and Harter, 2003; Litvin, 1997). In particular, these studies assert that judging people by sociodemographic and individual-based criteria of diversity (such as gender, age, ethnicity, or sexuality) leads to the exclusion and suppression of certain groups of organizational members (Kamenou and Fearfull, 2006). Moreover, seen from this perspective, diversity management approaches based on sociodemographic criteria of diversity can become sources of domination and alienation, as they reinforce (rather than help overcome) the separation and distinction between individuals (e.g., Bissett, 2004; Kalonaityte, 2009; Swan, 2009).

Other scholars have recently departed from such radical-critical views. Scholars following a ‘constructive-critical’ approach argue normatively that corporations should practice diversity management programs that foster the inclusion and social representation of individuals within the organization in order to fight inequality (Gotsis and Koretzi, 2013). For this purpose, constructive-critical scholars explore how diversity management practices are shaped by the ‘language in use’ (e.g., Janssens and Zanoni, 2005, 2014; Tomlinson and Schwabenland, 2009; Van Laer and Janssens, 2011; Zanoni, 2011). Thus, constructive-critical scholars tend either to be concerned with the role of language in perpetuating or challenging organizational power relations (Zanoni and Janssens, 2004) or highlight the relevant experiences of organizational members—for example, the discrimination that some employees face and the suppression they may suffer as a result of particular practices of diversity management (e.g., Kamenou and Fearfull, 2006; Schwabenland and Tomlinson, 2015).

In the same constructive-critical tradition, scholars have argued that diversity management research and practice should depart from predefined and static individual-bound categories (e.g., Tatli and Özbilgin, 2012). For instance, Özbilgin and his colleagues (e.g., Jonsen et al.,

2013; Nishii and Özbilgin, 2007; Syed and Özbilgin, 2009; Tatli and Özbilgin, 2012) suggested to apply an ‘intersectional’ approach to diversity management. This approach is based on a fluid understanding of diversity, according to which categories such as gender intersect with other categories, such as race, but are continually (re)negotiated in action (Styhre and Eriksson-Zetterquist, 2008). Consequently, these studies view individual discrimination as the result of intersecting systems of oppression and point out the dynamics as well as the pitfalls of static, individual-based conceptualizations of diversity (Styhre and Eriksson-Zetterquist, 2008; Syed and Özbilgin, 2009; Zanoni et al., 2010). Going back to our initial example of the Dutch company KPN, an intersectional approach can explain the change in policy as follows: because the education and training of the women that the firm hired on account of their gender were too similar to those of their male counterparts, they did not bring the qualities that were expected of them. In the eyes of KPN, they did not *perform* their ‘femaleness’ sufficiently. Consequently, studies that are based on intersectionality explicitly call for the creation of dynamic and relational approaches to managing diversity that are sensitive to the interplay of inequality dynamics in organizational settings and society at large (Tatli and Özbilgin, 2012).

Overall, within the critical stream of research, scholars differ in their assessments of the role of communication for diversity management. On the one hand, studies in the radical-critical tradition tend to dismiss corporate communication on diversity management altogether on the grounds that it perpetuates rather than eliminates discrimination (e.g., Bissett, 2004; Litvin, 1997; Singh and Point, 2006). Many critical scholars view communication in this context as mere ‘window dressing’ that allows organizations to pretend to appreciate a diverse workforce without, however, implementing practices that create genuine equal opportunities (e.g., Singh and Point, 2006). Within the constructive-critical tradition, on the other hand, some scholars put forth a performative view of diversity (e.g., Janssens and Zanoni, 2005;

Tienari and Nentwich, 2012), emphasizing the importance of communication in the social construction of diversity meanings. In this view, communication not only represents but also produces social reality (see also Austin, 1962; Searle, 1969). Yet, most of these studies primarily criticize the negative social consequences of various constructs of diversity for individuals in organizational contexts but do not relate the idea that language use has a formative role to the ontology of the organization, i.e., its communicative constitution (Ashcraft et al., 2009).

Thus, in this paper, we build upon and go beyond the constructive-critical stream of diversity management research by considering the constitutive and formative force of communication not only with regard to the concept of diversity, but also with regard to organizations as communicative entities (Cooren et al., 2011). Specifically, we argue that organizations and their business practices are subject to processes of communicative construction that may involve contextual voices, i.e. individual voices as well as larger societal discourses ‘outside’ of the organization’s (permeable) boundary. For instance, Prasad et al. (2011) have described how practices of organizational diversity are shaped by industry-wide ‘discourses of fashion’.

In the following, we propose a communication-centered approach to diversity management that takes into account the influence of these contextual voices on organizing processes and thus, as mentioned previously, leads to a different understanding of social representation. In other words, our reconceptualization implies moving the focus away from individual human beings (and their characteristics) and instead focuses on the plurality of organizational and contextual voices as the primary unit of analysis, i.e. individual opinions and societal discourses that become expressed and find resonance in organizational settings.

## **The Theoretical Foundations of a Constitutive-Polyphonic Perspective**

A growing body of literature suggests that the relation of communication to organization is constitutive in character; in other words, that communication constitutes organizations (CCO) (for recent overviews, see Ashcraft et al., 2009; Brummans et al., 2014; Cooren et al., 2011). In the CCO perspective, communication is seen as “axial—not peripheral to organizational existence and organizing phenomena” (Ashcraft et al., 2009, p. 22). Organizations are thus imagined here as precarious social entities (Nicotera, 2013) that necessitate to become continuously (re)incarnated in and through the occurrence of interconnected communicative practices (Blaschke et al., 2012; Nicotera, 2013).

In the following, we treat the CCO perspective as an integrated theoretical endeavor, while keeping in mind some key epistemological and methodological differences between the various schools of CCO thinking (see also Brummans et al., 2014; Kuhn, 2012; Schoeneborn et al., 2014). Within the CCO perspective, our argumentation primarily follows the work of the ‘Montreal School’ (e.g., Bencherki and Cooren, 2011; Cooren, 2004, 2012; Taylor and Cooren, 1997). This is because this line of CCO thinking tends to contrast most strongly with the transmission view of communication (Axley, 1984) and is thus particularly helpful for our inquiry.

In line with Cooren and Sandler (2014), we argue that the CCO perspective and particularly the idea that organizations come into being through multiple interconnected communicative practices (e.g., Blaschke et al., 2012; Taylor and Van Every, 2000) exhibit striking similarities to the idea of the ‘polyphonic organization’ (Hazen, 1993). Both streams of the literature emphasize that it is important to attend to the plurality of voices in organizational contexts (e.g., Belova, 2010; Christensen and Cornelissen, 2011; Cooren and Sandler, 2014; Hazen, 1993; Shotter, 2008). However, while the majority of works that follow the CCO perspective

tend to be descriptive in nature (for an overview on rare exceptions, see Ashcraft et al., 2009), scholars who work with the notion of polyphony tend to employ this concept to make normative claims about organizations. In this latter view, organizations should be open to the equal expression of diverse voices. The expression of a plurality of voices is understood here as an important prerequisite for innovation and change as well as ethically responsible organizing (e.g., Carter and Clegg, 2003; Jabri et al., 2008; Kornberger et al., 2006).

Building on both streams of the literature, in what follows, we use the label ‘constitutive-polyphonic’ to emphasize that our viewpoint goes beyond the CCO perspective as it incorporates the normative claim (from research on polyphony) that it is worthwhile for organizations (and society more generally) to embrace dissent and the plurality of voices in a dialogic way. In the following, we will delineate this combined constitutive-polyphonic perspective on the basis of three main tenets.

### **(1) Organizations as Emergent and Polyphonic Phenomena**

Proponents of the CCO perspective highlight the formative role of communication for social realities and material structures. This ‘constitutive’ notion of communication (Cooren, 2012; Craig, 1999) is grounded in ‘speech act theory’ (Austin, 1962; Searle, 1969), which argues that utterances tend to be ‘performative’ in character; in other words, utterances do not only represent, but actively contribute to the creation of social reality. In stark contrast to viewing communication as a ‘conduit’, a metaphor that implies a simple and friction-free transfer of information or ready-made meanings between senders and receivers (Axley, 1984), CCO scholars depict communication as an inherently complex, dynamic, and precarious accomplishment (e.g., Cooren et al., 2011).

According to the CCO view, organizational phenomena arise from a multitude of recurrent and interconnected communicative practices that are enacted on its behalf (Bencherki and

Cooren, 2011; Taylor and Cooren, 1997), including communicative practices such as diversity management. Accordingly, organizations are seen here as emergent formations that tend to be created by multiple and potentially dissonant voices (Christensen and Cornelissen, 2011). In this regard, the CCO perspective's concept of diversity exhibits striking similarities to Bakhtin's notion of 'polyphony' that has been used by organization scholars to highlight the multi-voiced character of organizations (Bakhtin, 1984; Belova et al., 2008; Hazen, 1993). Proponents of the polyphonic viewpoint suggest that organizational practices should be understood as "multi-centered, non-linear and intersubjective activities" (Belova et al., 2008, p. 494). From this perspective, the 'polyphonic organization' (Hazen, 1993; see also Belova, 2010; Belova et al., 2008; Kornberger et al., 2006; Shotter, 2008) does not have one voice, as the idea of 'integrated communication' might imply (for a critical discussion, see Wehmeier and Winkler, 2013), but results from the expression of multiple voices. When the organization speaks (or acts), many voices (i.e., individual voices and societal discourses) may speak through it.

## **(2) The Involvement of Contextual Voices in the Communicative Constitution of Organizations**

Works that adopt the CCO viewpoint question the clear-cut distinction between the 'inside' and 'outside' of organizations (e.g., Christensen and Cornelissen, 2011). According to these works, the organizational boundary is relatively fluid, permeable, and ambiguous and thus needs to be maintained recurrently through speech acts that demarcate what the organization is and what it is not (Bencherki and Cooren, 2011; Dobusch and Schoeneborn, 2015). Importantly, the idea of permeable boundaries suggests that contextual voices can partake in the communicative co-constitution of organizations (Kuhn, 2008). In this view, organizations are incarnated through communicative practices that allow actors to claim the authority to speak in the organization's name (Taylor and Cooren, 1997). Importantly, communicative



practices can be invoked independently of whether or not such claims are uttered by members or non-members of the organization, as long as these speech acts contribute to the attribution of collective actorhood to organizational phenomena (Bencherki and Cooren, 2011; Dobusch and Schoeneborn, 2015). Thus, what is ‘inside’ and ‘outside’ the organization is contextually bound and tends to become continuously negotiated through communication.

In this perspective, the boundary of an organization is demarcated through the inclusion or exclusion of specific voices, rather than individual members (see also McPhee and Zaugg, 2000). Thus, the boundaries of an organization are drawn communicatively, through the authorization of specific voices that are allowed to speak on the organization’s behalf (Taylor and Van Every, 2014). It follows that organizations need to maintain their identity continuously through communicative interactions that may involve organizational members and/or non-members (Dobusch and Schoeneborn, 2015). In other words, from this view, we can understand diversity management as a form of *organizational boundary management* that needs to be receptive to the diversity and complexity of environmental and societal voices, while being able to ensure the organization’s status as a (more or less) distinct entity, at the same time.

### **(3) The Polyphonic Dialogue as Guiding Principle of Organizing**

We suggest that CCO theorizing can be usefully combined with Bakhtin’s notion of ‘polyphony’ (Bakhtin, 1984; see also Cooren and Sandler, 2014). Bakhtin’s idea of polyphony, which he developed in the context of literature studies, has found increasing reception in organization studies (e.g., Belova, 2010; Belova et al., 2008; Hazen, 1993; Kornberger et al., 2006). In Bakhtin’s view (1984) communication is inherently relational and dialogic: because individuals think and act always in relation to each other, their utterances do not only represent their individual perspective but also include the overall context of the

interaction, that is, the larger societal discourses in which they are embedded (Bakhtin, 1984; Gardiner, 2004).

In his discussion of polyphony, Bakhtin highlighted the importance of dialogue (e.g., Bakhtin, 1984; Shotter, 2008). To understand this focus better, it is worthwhile recalling that the idea of polyphony originates in music. In a polyphonic composition, voices are respected for their own timbre and are not unified in a single voice (Christensen et al., 2008); instead, they are temporarily connected in a dialogic way. Bakhtin employed the notion in his discussion of Dostoyevsky's novels. In a nutshell, he argued that in polyphonic settings, when several voices are linked in the unifying moment of dialogue, authority is not retained by a single voice such as the voice of the author of a novel (Bakhtin, 1984). Although true consent or understanding can never be reached (a point where Bakhtin departs from Habermasian discourse ethics; see Habermas, 1991), the dialogic process is a desirable end in itself because it connects various voices in a particular context at any given moment (Gardiner, 2004).

Organizational scholars who are drawing on the notion of polyphony tend to argue that organizations should be studied as discursive spaces that should allow different voices to be expressed (e.g., Hazen, 1993; Kornberger et al., 2006; Pless, 1998). Viewing organizations as polyphonic phenomena implies that multiple voices are dynamically combined, rather than merged, in dialogue (Hazen, 1993) and may challenge authoritative tendencies (Kornberger et al., 2006). Works that have been influenced by Bakhtin's initial ideas emphasize that centripetal forces (i.e., hegemonic tendencies towards harmonization) and centrifugal forces (i.e., resisting voices that tend toward heterogeneity) can coexist in organizational settings (e.g., Brown, 2006; Geiger and Antonacopoulou, 2009). However, organizations are presumed to strive towards communicative homogeneity as "dominant discourses seek to shut down diversity by limiting the possibilities of sensemaking to a privileged and limited range of discursive strategies" (Carter and Clegg, 2003, p. 296). Some scholars argue that

facilitating polyphony holds the potential for organizational change (e.g., Carter and Clegg, 2003; Christensen et al., 2015; Jabri et al., 2008; Kornberger et al., 2006). Accordingly, these authors suggest following the ideal of the polyphonic dialogue, i.e. a moment in which various dissonant voices are linked dialogically but without merging, as a guiding principle of organizing (e.g., Kornberger et al., 2006; for a critical view see Letiche, 2010).

However, Bakhtin (1984) does not provide clear guidance on how to practice such polyphonic dialogue in organizational settings. In turn, we find the works by Pless (1998, 1999) useful for filling this gap. Pless (1998) argues that corporate management initiatives aiming to solve ecological crises oftentimes fail because firms do not engage actively with dissensual and marginal voices of internal and external stakeholders in a polyphonic way. In order to overcome this dilemma, she stresses five guiding principles for conducting polyphonic dialogues between corporations and their internal and external stakeholders (Pless, 1998, pp. 315-325; for similar remarks, see Cunliffe and Eriksen, 2011): First, one important requisite for a polyphonic dialogue is the *mutual recognition* of all participants of the dialogue. Second, the establishment of long-lasting relations with each other enables all sides to develop *reciprocal trust*. Only then, as Pless (1998, 1999) accentuates, will people feel free to speak their minds. Third, corporations need to give people room to develop and express their voices. Following the principle of *mutual enabling*, corporations should demonstrate that they care for these voices and thus actively encourage people to bring their (marginalized) voices to the fore. Fourth, corporate managers should also foster *mutual understanding* of different viewpoints, which can be achieved by addressing directly underlying assumptions or bias. Finally, her approach emphasizes the importance of ‘multiloguing’ (Pless, 1998, p. 324), i.e. the negotiation between multiple logics of the participants of a dialogue – as a precondition of forming a common basis of understanding. For Pless (1998), these five principles and the idea

of all voices to be “different but equal” (p. 321) are the foundation for common, mediated negotiation between all participating voices in a polyphonic dialogue.

Pless (1999) was also among the first scholars to identify fruitful links between the notions of diversity management and polyphony (for another rare exception, in Danish language, see the work by Rennison, 2009). Pless stresses the necessity of establishing communicative processes within corporations that enable marginalized and ‘different’ voices of culturally different employees to speak up (Pless, 1999). Furthermore, she emphasizes that embracing alternative voices enables corporations to tap into the innovative and creative potential of bringing together different viewpoints, experiences and knowledge. Importantly, her argumentation is based in the assumption that “organizations are constructs that through the communicative discourses of their employees and with their social and cultural environment take on a particular ‘Gestalt’ (shape)” (Pless, 1999, p. 164; own translation). Thus, Pless puts forth a relational ontology of organizations that exhibits similarities to what is known as the CCO perspective today (Cooren et al., 2011).

Consequently, we understand the work by Pless (1998, 1999) as an important precursor for our polyphonic-constitutive reconceptualization of diversity management. We argue that recent works from the CCO perspective (Cooren et al., 2011) are helpful to expanding Pless’s argumentation to the full consequentiality of a communication-centered ontology of organizations (Nicotera, 2013). If voices become the main matter of concern and if voices are not bound to specific individuals (see Bakhtin, 1984), it becomes important for diversity management not only to foster the expressivity of voices by organizational members but also to become attentive to the voices that get expressed through larger societal discourses, i.e. in supra-individual form. In the following, we will elaborate on the practical and ethical implications of reconceptualizing diversity management as a polyphonic endeavor.

## **Toward a Constitutive-Polyphonic Reconceptualization of Diversity Management and Communication**

Our review of the diversity management literature has aimed to show that, despite a broad range of understandings of the diversity concept, research in both the instrumental and the critical traditions tends to be primarily concerned with fostering the ‘within-unit’ diversity (Harrison and Klein, 2007) between individual organizational members (e.g., Cox and Blake, 1991; Harrison and Klein, 2007; Kamenou and Fearfull, 2006; Riach, 2009; Scott et al., 2011; van Laer and Janssens, 2011). Our own constitutive-polyphonic view departs from prior research on diversity management by treating the diversity of communicative practices (rather than the diversity of individuals) as the primary unit of analysis (see also Ashcraft et al., 2009). We argue that for organizations to be able to act (responsibly) in a networked society (Schultz et al., 2013), they must consider the diversity of organizational and contextual voices and encourage dissonant voices to be heard and included.

Table 1 summarizes and compares the main differences between the streams of diversity management scholarship that we discussed in the previous section and our constitutive-polyphonic view.

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*Insert Table 1 about here*

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In the preceding section we discussed how the ‘ends’ of diversity management can be defined on the basis of polyphony. In this section, we elaborate on the ‘means’ that can be used to achieve these ends and discuss the implications of a constitutive-polyphonic understanding of diversity management in three main application areas.

In a nutshell, we argue that the likelihood of voices becoming expressed in an organization can be increased in three exemplary ways: (1) by using the human resources management (HRM) practices of recruitment and promotion to incorporate the goal of increased polyphony of organizational voices, (2) by fostering structural resonance in order to accommodate the polyphony of contextual voices, and (3) by nurturing the interplay between organizational and contextual voices through responsible leadership practices, an inclusive organizational culture, and educational measurements. We discuss each of these application areas in further detail below.

### **(1) Facilitating the Polyphony of Organizational Voices**

Existing works from the instrumental perspective on diversity management provide insights into how organizations can implement HRM practices aimed at managing the diversity of organizational members (e.g., Alcázar et al., 2013; Kulik, 2014). For example, diversity-oriented recruitment practices are seen here as a strategic way of enhancing variety of the applicant pool and an organization's workforce (e.g., Scott et al., 2011). Promotion practices that favor diversity are presumed to have similar effects (Cox and Blake, 1991; James, 2000). However, critical studies point out that diversity management measures that rely on predefined categories of difference may have ambiguous and perhaps even negative consequences for particular groups of organizational members (Tatli and Özbilgin, 2012) and question whether such procedures can actually achieve their goal of increasing organizational diversity.

As examples from organizational practice such as the KPN case illustrate, it is problematic to assume that diversity in terms of attributes such as gender or race automatically results in the diversification of viewpoints, ideas, or opinions (see also Zanoni et al., 2010). In our view, implementing recruitment or promotion practices that prioritize particular groups of

organizational members, such as stipulating quota on the basis of gender, race, and similar sociodemographic attributes may help increase social representation within the organization but do not necessarily ensure polyphony in the sense of ‘discursive diversity’ (i.e. the representation of societal discourses and voices). In response to this issue, our constitutive-polyphonic approach suggests that it is important to consider the conditions that favor the polyphony of organizational voices and that allow for the expression of dissent and otherness as a key way of increasing diversity. Our approach implies that communicative procedures, structures, and cultures need to be designed in a way so that they increase the likelihood for the expression of organizational polyphony (or at least the establishment of a counter-weight to organizational tendencies towards a homogenization of voices; see Carter and Clegg, 2003, p. 296).

In the context of HRM practices, in order to increase the variety of voices in organizational contexts, polyphony would need to become a guiding principle in the recruitment, retention, and promotion of members. For instance, our proposed approach implies turning the focus away from individual (e.g., sociodemographic) attributes that the applicant might bring to the organization. Instead, from our constitutive-polyphonic viewpoint, the key question is which candidates for recruitment or promotion are most likely to make a team more diverse in terms of views, attitudes, and values (see also Pless and Maak, 2004, pp. 133–134).

As we discussed earlier, Bakhtin (1984) envisions communication as a relational and context-bound dialogic process. Applying this principle to organizations, we suggest that procedures of recruitment and promotion should furthermore involve to create opportunities for open dialogue (see also Cunliffe and Eriksen, 2011). A practical way of achieving open dialogue would be, for example, the introduction of group exercises (Philipps, 2014) in which applicants for different jobs at the same organization engage in problem-solving activities together. Exercises like this can bring to the fore to what extent applicants are able to engage

in the facilitation of voice expression in a dialogic way (for similar ideas in the context of group payments, incentivisation, and promotion, see also Pless, 1999, p. 170). At the same time, reorientation towards polyphonic recruitment can also help restore one of the core ideas of diversity management; that is, realizing the potentials for creativity and innovation that lies in bringing together diverse and heterogeneous viewpoints (e.g., Bassett-Jones, 2005).

However, one might object that even in a polyphonic environment new members may eventually become assimilated into a homogeneous organizational culture and may lose their potential to contribute to its polyphony. Popular measures of diversity management, such as mentoring programs, can even intensify such processes of homogenization (Gilbert et al., 1999). In this context, our viewpoint stresses that organizational cultures are communicatively constituted, as well (see Cooren et al., 2013). Consequently, to avoid tendencies towards a culture of homogeneity, it is important to establish mechanisms that make the acceptance of otherness more likely (Shotter, 2008). The creation of open communication between superiors and subordinates whose goal is power-sharing through participatory processes of decision making (Sadri and Tran, 2002) can be seen as a first and important step toward facilitating an open communicative culture. We will return to this point when we look at the facilitation of the interplay of organizational and contextual voices through day-to-day practices.

## **(2) Creating Structural Resonance for Contextual Voices**

As argued above, our constitutive-polyphonic viewpoint emphasizes that organizations are co-constituted not only by the expression of voices of organizational members, but also by the voices of non-members. This *contextual* co-constitution of organizational phenomena is especially pronounced in today's age of the 'networked society' (Schultz et al., 2013) or 'stakeholder society' (Maak and Pless, 2006). While existing research on diversity management tends to focus on the differences and boundaries between organizational



members (e.g., Kalonaityte, 2009), the constitutive-polyphonic perspective enables us to illustrate how the boundaries of the organization are established vis-à-vis its environment in and through communication.

In line with these considerations, our constitutive-polyphonic approach highlights the need to establish ‘structural resonance’ for contextual voices; that is, organizational structures that enable a multitude of contextual voices to become heard in organizational settings. To illustrate the idea of structural resonance let us consider the example of ‘issue monitoring’, that is, the strategic and proactive observation of media coverage of issues of potential concern for the organization (e.g., Heath and Palenchar, 2009). The Swiss consumer goods firm Nestlé, for instance, recently established a ‘Digital Acceleration Team’ that monitors on a real-time basis, via traditional or social media, emerging topics, opinions, and conversations that might be important for the corporation, also in order to pre-empt reputational crises (Abramovich, 2013). Such measures increase the likelihood of an organization ‘hearing’ a range of contextual voices and allow the latter to play a formative role for that organization (see also Christensen and Cornelissen, 2011).

We should point out, however, that even if certain practices of issue management enable organizations to register the plurality of voices in their environment, this does not necessarily translate into allowing these voices to influence the organization’s core activities, which are usually guided by criteria of profitability and efficiency and by the ‘voices’ of marketing, accounting, or finance (see also Schoeneborn and Trittin, 2013). This becomes particularly problematic if this type of monitoring is carried out by an organization’s (largely detached) corporate communications or PR division—perhaps even outsourced to an external provider—or if it is used as a mere defense mechanism to buffer critical voices. It follows that structural resonance is not limited to acknowledging symbolically diverse voices, but also

involves engaging actively with contextual polyphony through processes of change and innovation (see also Christensen et al., 2013).

One way of allowing voices to enter organizational discourses is through new information and communication technologies (ICTs). While we acknowledge that, generally, communication technologies can also lead to behavior that limits polyphony, such as cyber-bullying (e.g., Lutgen-Sandvik and Tracy, 2012), ICTs offer the potential to create new arenas and opportunities for discursive diversity, thus allowing diverse organizational and contextual voices to be heard (see also Gossett, 2006; Kornberger et al., 2006). Social media in particular are known for their capacity to create arenas in which individuals can actively participate in diffuse networks (Whelan et al., 2013) that, in turn, enable organizing for inclusive work environments beyond formal inclusion efforts of diversity management initiatives (Zanoni et al., 2010).

For example, in 2011, the Swiss outdoor clothing corporation Mammüt was confronted with protests and public outrage on their social media outlets after an activist criticized the corporation, which is known for its commitment to sustainability, for joining a list of firms that endorsed a pending Swiss law aimed to lessen restrictions on corporate CO<sub>2</sub> emissions. Reacting to the outrage within 24 hours, the corporation stated that it would immediately leave that group of companies and apologized for the confusion that its presence on that list had raised about its motives (Tresch, 2011). This example demonstrates that communication platforms such as social media are an important means for opening organizations to contextual voices. At the same time, the Mammüt example also shows that simply creating a communication platform is insufficient. Engaging with contextual voices on the one hand and responding to these voices by making internal behavioral changes and adapting business practices on the other demonstrates that an organization is receptive to contextual polyphony and thus resonant. In this case, by withdrawing from the list and continuously improving their

sustainability activities, Mammut demonstrated responsiveness to the polyphony that included critical voices. Yet, in line with the study by Baumann-Pauly et al. (2013), we assume that it is comparably easier for small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), such as Mammut, to establish structural resonance in the sense of establishing a tight link between external communication and internal implementation. In comparison, multinational corporations (MNCs), such as Nestlé, have to deal with a much higher degree of complexity in their value chains and decision-making structures (Baumann-Pauly et al., 2013).

The Mammut example furthermore highlights the necessity to discuss diversity management also in the larger context of corporate social responsibility (CSR). Indeed, CSR scholars suggest that diversity management should be treated as an integral element of CSR strategies (e.g., Bear et al., 2010; Matten and Moon, 2004; for a critical discussion, see Jonsen et al., 2013). Through CSR activities, corporate actors engage in the negotiation of what constitutes appropriate organizational behavior with the society at large (Castelló et al., 2013). If diversity is understood as communicative plurality, a polyphony-resonant organization would allow diverse discourses on CSR issues to be heard and arguments of profitability to be challenged by notions of ethics, responsibility, and equality.

### **(3) Managing the Interplay of Organizational and Contextual Voices**

The strategic facilitation of organizational polyphony (e.g., through HRM practices) and the creation of opportunities for contextual voices to become heard (e.g., through what we termed ‘structural resonance’) are important prerequisites for polyphonic organizing; yet, they ultimately remain insufficient if organizations do not facilitate the dynamic interplay between organizational and contextual voices in their day-to-day business activities. Considering that polyphony must be actively encouraged we discuss in the following three important preconditions for practicing polyphonic dialogues (based on the principles of mutual

recognition, reciprocal trust, mutual enabling, mutual understanding and multi-logical negotiations; Pless, 1998): (a) The role of (responsible) leadership in facilitating polyphonic dialogues, (b) a corresponding inclusive organizational culture in which dissonant voices are accepted and respected and can be uttered, and (c) the implementation of educational measurements to develop the individual competencies of organizational members and non-members to engage in organizational polyphony

First, we find it useful to draw on the notion of *responsible leadership* (e.g., Maak and Pless, 2006; Pless et al., 2012; Voegtlin et al., 2011). This body of literature, which draws primarily on Habermasian discourse ethics (Habermas, 1991), highlights stakeholder dialogues, conflict mediation, collaborative problem solving and decision-making processes, or workshops on creativity and innovation as essential practices for responsible leadership, i.e., leadership that cultivates relationships between the organization and its societal context on the basis of humane and moral values (e.g., Voegtlin et al., 2011). For instance, Anita Roddick, the founder of the corporation The Body Shop, can serve as an example of this type of leadership (see also Pless, 2007). Roddick was known to value honesty, fairness, respect, and care for others. Based on these values, she applied a business model of corporate responsibility when founding The Body Shop, a corporation that continuously fosters the inclusion of a multitude, and oftentimes dissonant internal and external stakeholder demands based on reciprocal trust (Pless, 2007).

Responsible leadership approaches offer guidance on how organizations can reach consensual agreements with their various stakeholders (i.e. based on mutual recognition and - understanding) through dialogue. We argue that these approaches are valuable in the context of diversity management, as well (see also Pless and Maak, 2004). However, our constitutive-polyphonic viewpoint differs from existing works on Habermasian variants of responsible leadership research (e.g., Voegtlin, 2015; Voegtlin et al., 2011) in one important regard:

While Habermasian discourse ethics implies striving for consensual agreements among the participants in a dialogue, our Bakhtinian approach to discourse ethics underscores the importance of dialogues as a process of voice articulation, regardless of whether a consensual agreement between multiple voices can be reached (Gardiner, 2004). This is made possible exactly because, in dialogue, also one and the same individual can bring in various voices (Bakhtin, 1984). Accordingly, within a polyphonic dialogue, responsible leaders would facilitate that participating subjects bring in various, potentially dissonant voices into the conversation, including the contextual voices of absent stakeholders or wider societal discourses (see also Jabri et al., 2008). Managing diversity as polyphony thus implies that responsible leaders in practice mediate and translate between multiple logics of various organizational and contextual voices, in order to deconstruct and therefore manage differences, without negating them (see also Kornberger et al., 2006; Pless, 1998). For example, in the context of CSR, this would mean for responsible leaders to engage account for the contextual voices that critically address the social and environmental impact of the firm's business conduct (Pless, 1998) and to mediate between these voices and organizational voices that follow an economic logic, for instance by translating CSR issues into a 'business case' rationale (see also Schultz and Wehmeier, 2010).

Moreover, responsible leadership literature emphasizes the ability of leaders, i.e. influential organizational members, to enable the interplay between various voices. Yet, drawing on Bakhtin, who saw the fictional characters of Dostoyevsky's novel be capable to challenge of the author's authority (Bakhtin, 1984; see also Jabri et al., 2008), a constitutive-polyphonic viewpoint implies to assign responsibility to organizational members on various levels (i.e. not only leaders or managers) to act as important facilitators and enablers of both organizational and contextual polyphony (Cunliffe and Eriksen, 2011; Fairhurst, 2008). An insightful example of how 'ordinary' organizational members become part of organizational

polyphony in a more ‘bottom up’ fashion is the social enterprise Gram Vikas (see also Pless and Appel, 2012). Gram Vikas aims to provide sustainable rural development in India; for this purpose, the organization establishes democratic and self-governing platforms in which the people of the Indian communities can engage in discussions and decisions affecting their lives. Gram Vikas’s procedures of participatory decision-making, shared responsibility, and the establishment of equal opportunity rules foster the ability of all people to raise their voices and to engage with each other in an inclusive way.

Second, a constitutive-polyphonic viewpoint calls for a corresponding *organizational culture* that may foster the inclusion of a plurality of voices into organizing according to the idea of all voices being “different but equal” (Pless, 1998, p. 321). In the same line of thinking, Pless and Maak (2004) suggest that organizations require diversity management to build upon “principles of recognition, mutual understanding, standpoint plurality and mutual enabling, trust and integrity, that allows for the integration of different and multiple voices into the organizational discourse” (p. 143) – a standpoint that comes close to our argumentation on how to foster proactively the expression of (organizational and contextual) polyphony. In this context, our approach is grounded in the assumption that polyphony arises when independent voices are dynamically combined without merging; in other words, in polyphonic dialogue, each voice is acknowledged for its own logic and tone in response to others (Shotter, 2008). Accordingly, this view implies to embrace dissent and contestation because of their potential to foster innovation as well as organizational and social change (e.g., Carter and Clegg, 2003; Jabri et al., 2008; Kornberger et al., 2006; Pless, 1998). For example, a culture that respects and appreciates polyphony can be cultivated through the implementation of spaces that explicitly allow dissenting and dissonant voices (Whelan, 2013) to engage together in open-ended dialogues (see also Cunliffe and Eriksen, 2011).

One example for the appreciation of dissonant voices from organizational practice is the international strategy consulting firm McKinsey, which nurtures as one of its core values the ‘obligation to dissent’ (Hill, 2011). In other words, even junior employees are encouraged to raise critical concerns, independently of hierarchical rank. To what extent this ideal is actually accomplished in day-to-day activities at McKinsey is an empirical question. However, this example at least shows a cultural appreciation for diversity that is focused on the expression of different voices in an industry that is not necessarily perceived as favoring diversity in terms of classic criteria of diversity management such as gender or ethnicity. Consequently, diversity management practices that rely on a constitutive-polyphonic viewpoint require organizations to implement explicitly communicative mechanisms that emphasize an inclusive environment in which their members feel comfortable and accepted when speaking up (see also Kornberger et al., 2006).

Third, we consider the implementation of *educational measurements* to be an important prerequisite for facilitating the discursive diversity in organizational settings. However, in contrast to existing approaches of diversity trainings the focus would lie not only on a diverse group composition (e.g., Roberson et al., 2001) but especially also on facilitating the interplay between organizational and contextual voices. In the same context, the contribution of any organizational member to organizational polyphony depends on their abilities to recognize and value different voices, i.e. to engage in an appreciative way with multiple logics (Pless, 1998). Yet, embracing, acknowledging, and respecting worldviews, opinions, or experiences that differ from one’s own can be a difficult task. Trainings and educations can foster the cognitive, behavioral, and emotional capacities of organizational members to deal with this polyphony (see also Pless, 1999). Thus, for example, we consider international service-learning assignments, i.e. programs that involve sending business leaders to foreign countries to work in cross-sectional-partnerships, to be helpful in order to sensitize managers for

different realities of human existence and to enable them to develop competencies to deal with unresolvable conflicts between multiple parties (and voices) (Pless et al., 2011). We understand such assignments to be fruitful opportunities for gaining experience in facilitating the polyphony of voices that managers potentially encounter in different organizational settings. From a constitutive-polyphonic viewpoint, such competencies of understanding issues from a different perspective should ideally be given to organizational members on various levels and in various job functions.

In addition to prior considerations on how to teach organizational *members* to accept, understand and engage in a dialogic way with different voices (e.g., Pless et al., 2011; Pless, 1998), a constitutive-polyphonic perspective also implies to expand the focus of educational measurements on polyphony facilitation to organizational *non-members*. This is because in line with the CCO perspective, we understand organizational membership not necessarily to be a pre-requisite for the co-constitution of the organization (e.g., Dobusch and Schoeneborn 2015). For instance, in the context of CSR, this would imply that corporations would teach representatives of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) on how they can voice their concerns in a way that the likelihood is raised that their arguments can find attentive ears in a corporate setting (e.g., by linking arguments for social and environmental concerns closely with the corporation's business practices and business opportunities of socially responsible behavior).

## **Conclusion**

### **Theoretical Contributions**

Our paper contributes to the literature on organizational diversity and diversity management in three main regards. First, we complement the instrumental and critical traditions of research on diversity management with a communication-centered perspective. We drew



especially on works following the CCO perspective (e.g., Ashcraft et al., 2009; Cooren et al., 2011) and other works from organization studies that understand organizations as polyphonic accomplishments (e.g., Belova et al., 2008; Hazen, 1993; Shotter, 2008) to suggest that existing works on diversity management and practice can be enriched by directing attention to the expression of voices as one important and distinct site of diversification (see also Pless, 1998; 1999). Accordingly, we depart from prior conceptualizations of diversity (e.g., Bell et al., 2011; Cox and Blake, 1991; Robinson and Dechant, 1997; Scott et al., 2011) that are based on sociodemographic individual differences (some of which can hardly be altered). Instead, we reconceptualize diversity as plurality of voices (i.e. individual voices and societal discourses) and arrive at a dynamic understanding of diversity management as a process of polyphonic voice articulation and mediation.

Importantly, we believe that our constitutive-polyphonic reconceptualization of diversity management can also help resolve existing contradictions between the instrumental ('business case') and critical ('social representation') views of diversity management. In particular, by building upon constructive-critical works (e.g., Prasad et al., 2011; Syed and Özbilgin, 2009; Tatli and Özbilgin, 2012), our paper marries instrumental and normative concerns of managing diversity. On the one hand, by switching the goal of diversity management to the maximization of voices and viewpoints in organizational settings, our approach can help bring diversity management practices closer to the actual aim of the business-case argument, i.e. the creativity and innovation that is fostered through a diversity of opinions and viewpoints (e.g., Bassett-Jones, 2005; Scott et al., 2011). On the other hand, our constitutive-polyphonic approach can help organizations to reach what has been called 'discursive representation' (e.g., Geden, 2005), i.e. a status in which different societal voices, discourses, opinions, and viewpoints become visible and present in organizations. In this regard, our theoretical

proposal adds one important dimension to the ethical considerations of social representation and justice that critical scholars highlight (e.g., Van Dijk et al., 2012).

Second, we add to prior research on diversity management by highlighting the organizational need to establish structural resonance for organizational voices and contextual voices. Prior diversity management research tends to treat organizations as stable entities (or ‘containers’) in which communication processes occur. In contrast, our constitutive-polyphonic perspective considers *both* organizational *and* contextual voices to play a formative role in the communicative constitution of organizations (see also Kuhn, 2008) and thus importantly contribute to the discursive diversity of organizations. However, as we have argued, the latter depends on the organization’s capacities for structural resonance; that is, on the extent to which contextual voices become ‘heard’ in organizational settings. In this regard, our paper underscores the fundamental embeddedness of organizations in larger networks of societal relations (see also Pless, 1998, 1999; Schultz et al., 2013) and thus stands in one line with prior works that have propagated a stronger recognition of contextual voices and discourses in diversity management (e.g., Kirby and Harter, 2003; Prasad et al., 2011).

One further important implication of acknowledging the importance of contextual polyphony for organizations is that diversity management can be seen as an integral part of CSR and the management of stakeholder relations (see e.g., Matten and Moon, 2004; Maak and Pless, 2006). However, the inclusion of external voices creates new challenges for organizations to maintain the status of a unified and identifiable social entity. Future research will need to investigate how diversity management can be further developed into a form of boundary management that finds a fruitful balance between maintaining organizational identity and the inclusion of diverse voices (see also Dobusch and Schoeneborn, 2015).

Third, our paper helps to further advance CCO thinking as a theoretical endeavor (Ashcraft et al., 2009; Cooren et al., 2011). While research in this theory stream tends to be primarily descriptive in character, we extend the CCO perspective by unfolding some of the ethical-normative implications of a communication-centered view of organization (see also the recent calls by Scherer and Rasche, forthcoming; Schoeneborn and Sandhu, 2013). To do so, we have suggested to extend the CCO perspective by drawing on the work of Bakhtin (1984) and his followers (e.g., Belova et al., 2008; Hazen, 1993; Shotter, 2008) on the importance of polyphony for organizations. However, in contrast to Habermasian approaches (e.g., Scherer and Palazzo, 2007; Scherer and Rasche, forthcoming), our Bakhtin-inspired proposal underscores that organizations should embrace dissonant, even dissenting, voices (see also Whelan et al., 2013).

In the same context, our constitutive-polyphonic approach also reveals important cross-connections with prior works that are concerned with the usefulness of polyphonic dialogues in organizational settings. In this regard, our study particularly follows the footsteps of Pless (1998, 1999). Our paper does not only make her works (that were partly published in German language) visible to an international audience but also contribute to her work by embedding it into a larger communicative ontology of organizations that has been developed over the past decades (Nicotera, 2013). By disentangling the concept of voice from particular individuals, we help move the analytical focus to communicative events as sites of voice expression as the main unit of analysis and link this issue to the fundamental question of the communicative (co-)constitution of organizations.

### **Limitations and Outlook on Future Research**

In this final section, we would like to point out some of the limitations of our conceptual inquiry. First, we did not examine the possibility that polyphony may not always lead to

positive outcomes either for organizations or for individual members (see also Belova, 2010). For example, multiple dissonant voices could conceivably lead to ineffective organizing because of their inability to create a shared understanding (e.g., Kornberger et al., 2006). Moreover, polyphony may overburden some organizational members with demands for personal flexibility and adaptation to a dynamic workplace (e.g., Belova, 2010). With that in mind, we encourage future research to investigate the specific boundary conditions under which the demands of organizational polyphony benefit both organizations and their members. Thus, future research should also consider investigating how various forms of organizations (e.g., business firms or non-profit organizations) differ in their polyphonic nature and subsequent requirements for polyphony maximization.

Furthermore, reducing the constitution of the organization to nothing but communication might sound naïve in some ways (for a similar argument, see Reed, 2010). Of course, organizations manifest themselves not only in symbolic ways (e.g., speech acts), but also in the materiality (e.g., technologies, objects, sites, and bodies) through which we experience reality (e.g., Ashcraft et al., 2009). However, our main claim is that communication is the primary mechanism through which material elements are shaped and transform organizing (Cooren, 2010). In that respect, our proposal is also aligned with other works that underline the close relationship between the discursive and material processes that form organizations in light of the increasing demands for workforce diversification (e.g., Ashcraft, 2013b; Ashcraft and Mumby, 2004).

In order to further advance the constitutive-polyphonic perspective on diversity management, we encourage scholars to take into account also the role non-human agency—an idea that has a particularly strong tradition within CCO theorizing (see Ashcraft et al. 2009) and that allows to further go beyond the works of Pless (1998, 1999). Cooren has added the notion of ‘ventriloquism’ to the CCO debate (Cooren and Sandler, 2014; Cooren, 2010, 2012), i.e., the

idea that all kinds of persons, but also non-human entities or ‘figures’ (Cooren and Sandler, 2014), such as the concept of diversity management, can gain agency in their own right in organizational settings. This idea goes beyond our current approach as well as those of our precursors (e.g., Pless, 1998, 1999). In the same line of thinking, one can argue that the ways in which differences are manifested in organizational settings are also due to the agentic capacities of the diversity concept as it has been institutionalized, e.g., in the form of dominant gender norms (see also McDonald, 2013). It follows that diversity as a concept would need to be diversified as such—that is, to allow for various meanings—in order to facilitate polyphony. Following these considerations, we believe that a *diversification of the diversity concept* will be an important task for future research.

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	<b>Instrumental perspective</b>	<b>Critical perspective</b>	<b>Constitutive-polyphonic perspective</b>
<b>Unit of analysis</b>	Attributes that account for differences between individuals	Social construction of attributes that account for differences between individuals	Communicative events that can involve organizational and/or contextual voices
<b>Level of analysis</b>	Individual/group level (workforce diversity)	Individual/group level (workforce diversity)	Communication level (plurality of voices that become expressed in communicative events)
<b>Understanding of diversity</b>	Diversity as a managerial variable that is based on (sociodemographic) differences among individuals	The meaning of diversity is subject to social construction and political power struggles	Diversity as the plurality of different organizational and contextual voices ('discursive diversity')
<b>Role of communication in diversity management</b>	Communication supports or interferes with organizational performance goals	Communication perpetuates or challenges inequalities and power relations	Diversity management is one of several communicative practices that (co-) constitute the organization
<b>Notion of organizational communication</b>	Homophonic: single-voiced, controlled, purposeful	Radical-critical views: communication as a tool that is exploited by firms Constructive-critical views: language in use as a dynamic political process in organizational settings	Polyphonic: multiple, interrelated, dynamic, sometimes contradictory and dissonant voices
<b>Rationale pro/contra diversity management</b>	Business case argument: Diversity management is useful as a tool to foster competitive advantage and (team) performance	Radical-critical views: Rejection of diversity management as a source of domination, alienation, and injustice; Constructive-critical views: Diversity management is desirable if it fosters the inclusion and social representation of individuals in organizational settings	Reconciliation of business case with social representation arguments by switching the focus to 'discursive diversity' as a source of innovation and change and representation of societal voices

Table 1: Comparison of the instrumental, critical, and constitutive-polyphonic perspectives on diversity management and communication