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# Discourses of Diversity, Equality and Inclusion: Trenchant Formulations or Transient Fashions?

## Abstract

Using bibliometric analysis of published work, the paper examines the discursive trends, patterns and implications of three different anti-discrimination solutions (equality, diversity and inclusion) over a 40 year period from 1970 to 2010. The findings reveal that the anti-discrimination discourses are consistent with management fashions, both in terms of their trends and the rhetorical strategies used by proponents to establish the dominance of their favoured approach, particularly by denigrating previous approaches. Practitioner-facing academics play a key role in the process by giving shape, exposure and credibility to the anti-discrimination solutions, but not in creating them. Only by breaking free of the oppositional discursive patterns can the debate move on to anti-discrimination solutions that attempt to blend together equality, diversity and inclusion.

Keywords: (1) diversity, (2) equality, (3) inclusion, (4) management fashion,  
(5) discourse, (6) bibliometric analysis

## INTRODUCTION

There has been an enduring, if not burgeoning, interest in diversity, equality and inclusion in the workplace over the past few decades (Edelman, Fullerton and Maradrita, 2001; Litvin, 1997; Page, 2007; Perriton, 2009; Zanoni and Janssens, 2007). As part of their formation and development, attempts have been made to define and classify diversity, equality and inclusion as etymologically different anti-discriminatory approaches. To this end, equal opportunities initiatives have been distinguished from diversity management strategies (Kandola, Fullerton and Ahmed, 1995; Liff, 1999) and, more recently, the concepts of inclusion and diversity have been delineated (Bendick, Egan and Lanier, 2010; Shore et al., 2011; Roberson, 2006). Although we know a considerable amount about the defining characteristics and the general application of diversity, equality and inclusion, insights into the ‘discursive production and consumption’ (Fairclough, 1995) of these different approaches to tackling discrimination in employment are limited. Hence, in this contribution, we seek to develop an understanding of the nature of these discourses in terms of their take up and popularity, their claims and narrative positioning, and their ‘interdiscursivity’ (i.e. the extent to which they can be seen as being interconnected and complimentary or independent and competing discourses). The main purposes are to develop an understanding of the way in which approaches are formed, how they become popular, and the processes of correspondence and transition between them.

There are four main parts to this paper. First, we review the management literature on diversity, equality and inclusion and identify some recurring themes and overarching patterns. Second, a meta-level analysis is provided by considering citation patterns and discursive trends within a large sample of published work on diversity, equality and inclusion contained in the Social Science Citation Index (SSCI). Third,

using citation software (Harzing, 2010) we explore the extent to which the three anti-discrimination discourses form a pattern which is comparable to that found within the literature on management fashions (Abrahamson, 1996; Kieser, 1997). Finally, we discuss the implications of treating anti-discrimination approaches as substantively different discourses (i.e. meaningful employment initiatives) or superficially different discourses (i.e. rhetorically-based management fashions) and consider the implications for future anti-discrimination initiatives.

## THE CONSTRUCTION AND CHRONOLOGY OF DIVERSITY, EQUALITY AND INCLUSION

Various anti-discrimination initiatives have enjoyed a period of prominence at different points in time over the past several decades, so in this section we review the extant literature and draw inferences regarding the discursive positioning of equality, diversity and inclusion as distinctive and temporally-embedded approaches to addressing aspects of under-representation and discrimination in the workplace. In particular we identify factors that commentators have used to explain the shift from equality to diversity, in order to assess whether they might also apply to recent changes in attention away from diversity towards inclusion.

### From Equality to Diversity

The rise in popularity of the concept of diversity in the practitioner press has been charted by Kelly and Dobbin (1998) and Edelman, Fuller and Mara-Drita (2001) using keyword searches in the ABI/INFORM database covering a period from the early 1970s until 1996. The pattern in both studies reveals little was written about the concept prior to 1987, but from that year there was a steep rise in the frequency of practitioner journal

articles referring to the concept, with a peak in 1993 and a steady decline during the subsequent three years. Both studies note that the take up of the concept coincided with the publication of the Workforce 2000 report (Johnston and Packer, 1987), which predicted massive demographic change requiring organisations to rethink their hiring strategies in order to survive; of particular concern was the startling prediction that by 2000 only 15% of new entrants to the US workforce would be US-born, white males. Edelman, Fuller and Mara-Drita (2001) point out that the predictions were subsequently proved by the Bureau of Labor Statistics to be wrong because they were based on a conceptual misunderstanding by the report's authors (see Friedman and Di Tomaso, 1996), but the impact had already occurred as 'the professional management literature picked up that (largely erroneous) threat and made it into a full-blown crisis with rhetoric that justified and necessitated a major change in management style.' (Edelman, Fuller and Mara-Drita, 2001, p 1614.)

The studies also draw attention to the role of consultants in articulating an appropriate response to meet the needs of the demographic and competitive challenge. A key example is Thomas (1990) who suggests that affirmative action (AA) had run its course and needed to be replaced with managing diversity – a term he is attributed with coining in the early 1980s (Kelly and Dobbin, 1998, p973). His argument is that AA has been successful in securing entry into organisations for women and ethnic minorities, but they are not being developed and are not progressing through the hierarchy, consequently organisations are therefore missing out on a talent pool essential to remain competitive. Subsequent to Thomas's call, other prescriptions for managing diversity began to appear (eg. Ross and Schneider, 1992; Kandola and Fullerton, 1994; Thomas and Ely, 1996). Moreover, there is evidence to suggest this transferred into management teaching. Litvin's (1997) analysis of organisational behaviour text books from the early

1990s shows the tendency to problematize difference and then offer diversity management as a solution. She concludes that the solution being promulgated in these texts (valuing differences) depends upon essentialist assumptions about the importance of demographic characteristics in driving and explaining behaviour, and an understatement of alternative socio-economic explanations.

It can be argued that the diversity exponents were tapping into a mood change in both political and public opinion that increasingly sought non-interventionist approaches from the government in the US and the UK (Kelly and Dobbin, 1998; Lorbiecki and Jack, 2000; Jewson and Mason, 1994). Empirical studies in the 1990s revealed how people in the US tended to conflate AA initiatives with ‘quotas’ or otherwise misunderstood them being only about preferential selection, and how there was little appetite for this type of direct intervention, even among some beneficiaries (eg. Heilman, Block and Lucas, 1992; Kravitz and Platania, 1993; Summers, 1995; also see Harrison et al., 2006 for a meta-analysis of 35 years of evidence).

The arguments in favour of a managing diversity approach are made by asserting its distinctiveness. Linnehan and Konrad’s (1999) review of the diversity literature leads them to argue that ‘many authors explicitly distance diversity from affirmative action programmes, and some openly malign affirmative action’ (p. 400). In this process of creating a conceptual distance, there is a tendency to exaggerate the differences, so EO/AA (equal opportunities/affirmative action) is portrayed as old, tired, failing and reliant on regulation imposed by the government, while MD (managing diversity) is new, fresh and full of potential, with an emphasis on responsible self-regulation of organisations guided by the free market. For instance the UK management consultants, Pearn Kandola, who have been prominent in promulgating the importance of managing diversity, describe it as an ‘evolutionary step’. They assert that managing diversity has a

‘positive starting point’ that ‘embraces everyone’, so ‘no one is excluded, even white middle class males’ (Kandola, Fullerton and Ahmed, 1995, pp31-32.) The contrast, both stated and implied, is that the equal opportunity approach is backwards, less developed, not adapted to current organisational needs and unfairly selective in those it assists.

In establishing distinctiveness, the rhetoric of diversity management in the practitioner-oriented literature began to ignore civil rights/social justice arguments (Edelman, Fuller and Mara-Drita, 2001) and took an economic turn (Lorbiecki and Jack, 2000) by almost exclusively focusing on arguments based on improved performance (through the input of new skills, new ideas and different ways of working), greater profitability (through the acquisition of new customers, the development of innovative products and services, and reduced litigation) and better chances of survival and growth (through greater competitiveness and an improved corporate image). The shift in focus is explicit in the early articles; for example, Thomas (1990, p113) advocates business reasons as the sole motivation for managing diversity, and Lorbiecki and Jack (2000,pS21) note the domination of such arguments in the practitioner literature they reviewed.

A further way of asserting the distinctiveness of the concept of diversity was through expanding the traditional demographic characteristics that have been the focus of EO/AA initiatives (for example, sex, age, race/ethnicity, disability) to include a wider range of attributes (for example, cultural styles, functional backgrounds and cognitive styles) that might differentiate people and be enlisted in securing economic gains for the organisation (Prasad, 2001,p64). Harrison, Price and Bell (1998) separate surface level diversity (attributes such as sex, age and race) from deep-level diversity (differences in attitudes, beliefs and values) and note other studies where similar distinctions have been drawn (Jackson, May and Whitney, 1995; Milliken and Martins, 1996). They argue that

differences between people on deep-level diversity dimensions provide fuller explanations of inter-group tension. Moreover, they suggest that deep-level diversity is mutable, so allows greater opportunity for change. In this sense, it might be argued that the expansion of diversity beyond demographics provided a fresh impetus for change that managers found appealing since managing diversity implies moving beyond the traditional group-based characteristics, to individual differences where any clustering of people into groups is along lines of attitudes and values. However, the conceptual expansion of relevant differences can also lead to managers stretching the definition of diversity further and taking into account aspects that might be considered as trivial such as the example of talkativeness (cited by Edelman, Fuller and Mara-Drita, 2001) or nebulous, such as lifestyle (Copeland, 1988).

There is an underlying question of whether these distinctions between EO/AA and MD are matters of substance or rhetorical distancing. A few commentators argue that while the rhetoric might have changed, there is nothing to distinguish the practices of EO/AA and MD (for example, Kelly and Dobbin, 1998) while others point out that the differences are real but may have been exaggerated and that many of the diversity initiatives (the substance) would sit comfortably within previous equal opportunity approaches (Kirton and Greene, 2000) – an observation based both on comparison of concepts (Kirton, 2002) and empirical evidence (for example, Liff, 1999; Foster and Harris, 2005). Similarly, Noon (2007) suggests that there is an associated tendency to overlook the business rationales that have been used in the past to make a case for equal opportunity initiatives.

To summarise, managing diversity has emerged as a reaction to a supposed demographic threat, has been taken up by commentators focused on a practitioner audience and has been developed conceptually to distinguish it from its predecessor of



EO/AA. In developing this distinctiveness, proponents have stressed a business case rationale, the incorporation of individual differences (rather than the social group differences based on demographic characteristics) and a voluntarist/deregulated agenda for change, driven by the market.

#### From Diversity to Inclusion

More recently, the debate has taken a new direction, as academic commentators (for example, Roberson 2006) and consultants (for example, Burnett 2005) are making a clear distinction between diversity and inclusion. They tend to argue that while diversity is concerned with recognising the value of differences within the workforce and managing them for commercial advantage, inclusion is concerned with the processes that incorporate differences into business practices and thereby help to realise the value. One question is whether the emergent talk of inclusion constitutes the beginning of a shift away from diversity that might, in due course, be similar to the earlier shift from equality. To undertake an evaluation it might be appropriate to look at parallels in the rhetorical positioning identified above: the articulation of a need for change (perhaps evidence in a crisis discourse) and the conceptual distancing of the new concept (inclusion) from the previous one (diversity).

It was noted above that the discursive shift from equality to diversity was accompanied by talk of a need for a change to address a supposed demographic crisis. However, the discourse of inclusion has not articulated a comparable crisis. There appears to be an underlying recognition that diversity is not delivering on its promises, but is far short of the organisational survival and advantage rhetoric that underpinned the case for managing diversity. So far the portrayal of inclusion is more in terms of a missed opportunity rather than a business need. Within the practitioner literature there is

an implication that ‘inclusion’ is a superior approach that should replace diversity. For instance, the UK’s Chartered Institute of Personnel Management adviser on diversity is quoted as follows in an article by Evans (2006,p26).

“We talk much more about inclusion now, which is a dynamic... It is not about visible or non-visible traits of characteristics such as race or gender, sexuality or disability, which can all be stereotyped. It is about celebrating difference as an asset, since everyone is unique, and recognising that everyone can make a contribution.”

It is portrayed as the next stage in an evolutionary process from assimilation, through legal compliance to managing diversity (Lockwood, 2005), although it is not always made explicit what the distinctive feature of inclusion is that separates it from the concept of managing diversity.

Some commentators see diversity and inclusion as co-dependent. In this regard diversity is considered a necessary precursor to inclusion, while inclusion is the required antecedent of diversity. In other words, an organisation needs first a policy of diversity (to recognise the importance of valuing differences) and then a commitment to inclusion, in order to enact the benefits of difference (see for example Brook and Graham 2005). Chavez and Weisinger (2008) treat diversity and inclusion as overlapping concepts and suggest that inclusion shifts the emphasis from managing diversity to ‘managing for diversity’. The latter approach is ‘a proactive, ongoing strategy that creates a culture within which people appreciate and can capitalize on individual differences – regardless of changing legal, demographic and economic conditions’ (Chavez and Weisinger, 2008,p337). Furthermore they link this to an approach that Thomas and Ely (1996) identified as emerging in a few companies in the 1990s; they labelled this the learning-and-effectiveness paradigm and suggested that its distinctive feature was the integration of the employees’ perspective into the work of the organisation. In this respect, although Thomas and Ely did not use the term, their

analysis of diversity strategies might have been the first study to locate the strategic potential of 'inclusion'.

Importantly, an alternative discourse that makes a conceptual distinction between managing diversity and inclusion is emerging. Roberson (2006) finds that practitioners' definitions of diversity tend to focus on differences and the demographic composition of groups or the organisation, while definitions of inclusion focus on organisational objectives to increase participation of all employees and to leverage diversity effects in the organisation. She suggests a conceptual distinction is that a diversity approach is concerned with 'organisational demography' while an inclusion approach is concerned with the "removal of obstacles to the full participation and contribution of employees" (Roberson, 2006,p217). While Roberson's findings generally suggest conceptual distinctiveness she also adds a caveat noting how, in operational terms, there is likely to be overlap between diversity and inclusion, and that for some organisations a shift from diversity to inclusion might simply constitute a change in language rather than any material change in diversity management practices. This caveat is reminiscent of Kelly and Dobbin's (1998,p978) observation that although there was rhetoric of managing diversity being a new approach, at organisational level this often amounted to little more than repackaged EO/AA practices.

Roberson also raises the issue of whether inclusion might be considered part of the 'backlash' against diversity initiatives focused on social groups. She draws on a distinction made by Konrad and Linnehan (1995) between 'identity-blind structures' where formal HRM practices are designed to ensure that decision-making processes are the same for each individual regardless of group identity, and 'identity-conscious structures' where formal HRM practices take both demographic group identity and individual merit into consideration. Roberson then argues that 'inclusion' might

represent an identity-blind approach because it focuses on individual involvement/participation in decision making (based on factors from her survey). From this perspective she argues that 'inclusion' maintains the focus on the individual rather than on groups, so might be of little benefit to groups that historically have been excluded.

Less equivocally, Shore et al., (2011) make the case for a conceptual distinction between managing diversity and inclusion. Basing their arguments on optimal distinctiveness theory (Brewer, 1991) they propose a model of inclusion that captures an individual's need to balance both belongingness and uniqueness. Only when the appropriate balance is achieved in any given situation will the individual feel included: where an individual is treated as an insider (satisfying needs for belongingness) yet also encouraged to retain their uniqueness (confirming that their difference is valued). Conceptualised as a 2x2 matrix, Shore et al.'s dimensions of belongingness and uniqueness represent one of the first attempts to create a theory of inclusion that distinguishes it from managing diversity. However, like Chavez and Weisinger (2008) they recognise the connection with the integration-and-learning perspective identified by Thomas and Ely (1996; also, Ely and Thomas, 2001). Shore et al.'s theorisation also echoes earlier attempts to recognise the tensions of sameness and difference within the discourses and practices of both EO/AA and managing diversity (Liff, 1997; Liff and Wajcman, 1996).

If Shore et al.'s model counterbalances the emphasis on difference and the essentialising tendencies of the managing diversity approach, with considerations of how employees might be allowed to retain a sense of belonging, then it might be offering a conceptually distinctive alternative. It might also go some way to addressing Roberson's concern that inclusion approaches tend to be identity-blind, since it theorises

the salience of having one's distinctiveness from the group recognised and valued, and this distinctiveness of course might be associated with social group identity.

Clearly, there are some similarities between the ways in which inclusion is being conceived as conceptually distinct from managing diversity, just as managing diversity was portrayed as distinct from equality. If there are similarities between the shift from equality to diversity and diversity to inclusion we might expect to see this reflected in terms of the level and focus of academic interest over time. It is to this issue that we now turn our attention.

#### DIVERSITY, EQUALITY AND INCLUSION: COMPARATIVE TRENDS

Having offered some general insights into the temporal sequencing of equality, diversity and inclusion through a review of the literature, we now provide a more systematic and detailed analysis of trends. This required the application of a structured research protocol to the analysis of trends and citation levels within the field. More specifically, an analysis of the Social Science Citation Index (SSCI) was undertaken to identify a pattern of usage of the concepts of 'equality', 'diversity' and 'inclusion' within the extant literature. This involved an extensive bibliometric analysis of publications over a 40 year period between 1970 and the start of 2010. This period has been determined by the year from which reliable data are available from the SSCI (i.e. when records began in 1970) up to and including 2009.

Bibliometric analysis relies upon a process of longitudinal investigation and considers the content of a corpus of texts. Unlike other content-analytic approaches, such as 'content analysis' (Krippendorff, 2004; Neuendorf, 2002) or 'corpus linguistics' (Biber, Conrad and Reppen, 1998; McEnery and Wilson, 1996), bibliometric analysis is more concerned with overarching patterns of citation of key constructs over time rather

than aggregated word counts or sentence level patterns of word use. In this regard, bibliometric analysis engages with meta-level trends and it enables general patterns of academic interest in relation to particular phenomena to be identified. Interest in bibliometric analysis within management has grown in recent years and it has been used to explore the exponential growth of published work on ‘globalization’ across the social sciences (Oswick, Jones and Lockwood, 2009) and burgeoning academic interest in ‘workplace spirituality’ (Oswick, 2009). Although popular, there are two distinct limitations associated with undertaking a bibliometric analysis of the SSCI. First, as a form of content analysis, bibliometric inquiry reveals the use of a word rather than the way in which it is used, therefore it does not reveal any lexical shifts of meaning of the focal word over time or how it is positioned in relation to other phenomena (i.e. which words it used in combination or what topics it is applied to). Second, the SSCI does not include all journals in business and management. In particular, a number of ‘less well-cited’ or ‘low impact’ journals are not captured in the SSCI database, so papers appearing in most practitioner-oriented journals and professional journals are excluded. Specifically for our analysis it also means that scholars undertaking ground-breaking work may be underrepresented because conservative, mainstream journal editors were at first reluctant to take their work seriously (Blake-Beard, Finley-Hervey and Harquail, 2008, p401) leaving no alternative than publication outside the top-tier journals which, in some instances, fall outside the SSCI remit. Therefore, it might be the case that the early work of pioneering diversity scholars is less prominent than those who follow once the mainstream journal editors and reviewers recognise the legitimacy and quality of work in new areas such as diversity scholarship. Third, the index only covers journals, so influential books, such as Cox (1993) are being overlooked in the citation

count, even though the scholarly community has recognised and honoured such pioneering work (see Blake-Beard, Finley-Hervey and Harquail, 2008).

An extensive analysis of the SSCI facilitated the identification of instances where ‘equality’, ‘diversity’ or ‘inclusion’ was cited. In order to avoid the spurious use of these keywords in published work, the analysis focused on occasions where any of the three concepts were contained in the title of publications. The methodological emphasis therefore centred on articles where equality, diversity or inclusion was the core concept and meant that instances where any of the terms were mentioned in passing (e.g. in an abstract) or listed as an ancillary theme (e.g. in a cluster of keywords) could be excluded.

The aggregation of the SSCI data produced highlighted some interesting results (table 1). At a general level, it is apparent that equality, diversity and inclusion have proved to be popular areas of research over the past four decades. In the period between 1970 and 2009 a combined total of 13,896 publications on these topics appeared in the SSCI. This represents an average of 347 articles per year. The most popular of the three areas of inquiry is ‘diversity’ which comprised 54% (n=7,453) of the aggregated total. By comparison, ‘equality’ accounted for 33% (n=4,615) and ‘inclusion’ accounted 13% (n=1,828) of the total corpus.

#### Table 1 – About Here

If we consider trends as opposed to overall magnitude, the general trajectory of ‘diversity’ is also significant insofar as it has exhibited a sustained pattern of growth in the annual proportion of articles published (see figure 1). In particular, in 1970 there were only 35 articles published on diversity (representing 0.04% of the total SSCI

articles for the year). By 2009, the proportion of annual SSCI publications on diversity had risen to 566 constituting 0.251% of all recorded SSCI output for the year. It is important to note that the samples of articles on diversity, equality and inclusion were cross checked for instances where the terms were used in ways not related to aspects of organizational and socially-based discrimination-related activity (e.g. ‘bio-diversity’ or the use of ‘inclusion’ in relation to statistical processes). Extraneous usage of the terms was found to be greatest in relation to ‘diversity’, but it was still a relatively small proportion of the annual samples (e.g. it was found in 11% of the 566 articles appearing in the SSCI in 2010).

Figure 1 – About Here

Overall, academic interest in diversity appears to have considerably exceeded that shown towards equality and inclusion. However, beyond this general observation, it is informative to look at the respective trends of the three constructs. Figure 1 presents the work published as a percentage of the total SSCI publications for each year.

Although diversity has received extensive academic attention in recent years, equality was a more popular area of inquiry during the first two decades of analysis (from 1970 through to 1989). Post 1990, the gap between research on diversity and equality appears to have widened. In effect, interest in diversity has blossomed since about 1984-1985, while interest in equality has remained fairly constant over the whole period of analysis (from 1970 to 2009). The general trend for inclusion appears to resemble the publication pattern exhibited by diversity than equality albeit on a more modest scale.



Publications on inclusion have remained lower than those for diversity and equality throughout the period of analysis. Interest in inclusion appears relatively constant and ‘flat’ up to the early 1990’s and from this point onwards output appreciably increases on a yearly basis. Indeed by the start of 2010, inclusion is more or less on a par with equality in terms of publication levels. However, the respective trajectories appear to be different insofar as interest in equality has remained stable while interest in inclusion has grown.

Notwithstanding the emerging interest in inclusion, the interest in diversity remains the most significant area of interest and has continued to grow. Projecting forwards based upon the data presented in figure 1, we might draw two inferences. First, based upon their respective trajectories and a continuation of the existing trends, inclusion is likely to continue to grow as an area of academic inquiry. Second, interest in diversity looks set to remain the dominant area of the three for some time, but following a steep rise in the early to mid-1990’s levels of publication have consolidated and the rate of growth is beginning to slow down. The respective trends of academic ‘take up’ for the three anti-discrimination approaches may reflect substantive changes in the practices themselves over time or possibly it is indicative of changes in the way they are represented and produced as discursive formations. It is to this issue that we now turn our attention.

#### ANTI-DISCRIMINATION DISCOURSES: AN UNDERLYING PATTERN?

Both the earlier discussion of the literature and the bibliometric analysis of texts suggest that there is a cycle of popularity associated with anti-discrimination discourses. The bibliometric analysis demonstrates that for a period of time a ‘discourse of equality’ dominated (through the 70’s up to the early-90’s) and this was then overtaken by a

‘diversity discourse’ (from the early to mid-90’s). Edelman, Fuller and Mara-Drita (2001) also demonstrate that the ‘diversity discourse’ enjoyed a period of prominence within the practitioner community. Finally, Oswick (2010) has shown that in recent years a discourse around ‘inclusion’ has been widely adopted by practitioners (especially in the U.S.) and that amongst this group of stakeholders it is in fact becoming more popular than the ‘diversity discourse’. As a general trend, the recent emergence of the inclusion discourse is also supported by the bibliometric data where academic interest has grown over time (see figure 1).

When viewed in combination, the insights derived from the literature, evidence on practitioner trends, and results of the bibliometric analysis, all point to an overarching pattern: a discernible discursive shift of emphasis from ‘equality’ to ‘diversity’, and more recently towards ‘inclusion’. We would posit that the chronologically-based waves of interest in specific anti-discrimination approaches strongly resonate with the literature on management fads and fashions (Abrahamson, 1991; Abrahamson, 1996; Abrahamson and Eisenman, 2008; Abrahamson and Fairchild, 1999; Kieser, 1997). In the following subsections we explore the points of similarity and the implications of viewing anti-discrimination approaches through a ‘fashion lens’.

#### Anti-Discrimination Trends as Fashion Cycles

Are mainstream approaches to tackling workplace discrimination synonymous with management fashions? More specifically, are the patterns the same? Various authors have sought to plot the trajectory and sequencing of management fashions (eg. Abrahamson and Eisenman, 2008; Abrahamson and Fairchild, 1999). However, the most relevant study for our purposes is that of Kieser (1997) who used an approach that

calculated the frequency of published work on a cluster of fashions appearing in books and journal articles between 1982 and 1995. His analysis of a range of fashions, leads him to argue:

“Management fashions follow patterns which can be described by bell-shaped curves. At the start of a fashion, only a few pioneers are daring enough to take it up. These few are joined by a rising number of imitators, until this fashion is ‘out’ and new fashions come on the market” (Kieser 1997,p.51).

Kieser’s analysis identifies the fashion cycle as featuring overlapping patterns of growth, plateau and decline as successive fashions emerge. Our bibliometric analysis indicates that published work on equality forms a similar pattern because it features discernible growth in the early 1970’s which peaks in the early 1980’s and then declines through the late 80’s and early 90’s. Beyond this, we would contend that the popularity of diversity, which displaced equality, may now be beginning to plateau (particularly among practitioners) while inclusion is at a point where, in fashion terms, the “few are being joined by a rising number of imitators” (i.e. on the upward swing of the curve).

There are further similarities between the pattern of management fashions that Kieser identifies and the analysis of anti-discrimination approaches presented earlier. In particular he identifies three features that we found replicated in our analysis. First, the overall period of popularity of a given fashion/discourse is an extended one and the onset of decline coincides with the emergence of a new fashion/discourse: equality was the most popular discourse for a period of 18 years (between 1970 and 1988) prior to being overtaken by diversity. Second, the point at which fashion starts to decline directly corresponds to a notable rise in interest in a new phenomenon: the pattern of concomitant decline and growth occurs between equality and diversity in the early to mid-80’s. Third, although fashions become less popular they ‘flatten out’ at a lower

level of residual interest rather than completely disappearing. Our data show a lower level, continued interest in equality beyond 1992. Overall, it would seem there are distinct similarities between the cyclical basis of management fashions and the ebb and flow of anti-discrimination initiatives.

Having established some similarities in terms of general patterns and trends, we now turn our attention to the drivers and underlying characteristics of fashions and consider the extent to which they map on to anti-discrimination discourses.

#### Fashion Setting and Anti-Discrimination Endeavour

Abrahamson (1996) suggests four phases in the management fashion process: creation, selection, processing and dissemination. Creation is concerned with developing a new idea (i.e. an invention or reinvention of a technique or approach) and selection is the process of picking out a particular idea or technique and ruling out others. The processing phase “involves the elaboration of a rhetoric that can convince fashion followers that a management technique is both rational and at the forefront of management progress” (1996, p267). Finally, dissemination is about bringing the new technique or approach to the attention of a mass audience. The role of fashion setters is crucial to the development of a new fashion especially with regard to the creation and selection stages of the process.

So, who are the fashion setters of anti-discrimination approaches? Are they practitioners, consultants or academics? It is difficult to disentangle the contribution of practitioners and consultants, but there is some evidence to suggest that academics are not fashion setters. Nkomo and Cox (1996, p338) identify how the diversity discourse emerged first in the practitioner literature and only then became a focus for some organisational researchers in the early 1990s. Our data support this observation (see

figure 1). Similarly, the widespread and embedded interest in inclusion in the US practitioner community (see Oswick, 2010) has acted as an antecedent to the academic interest that is now emerging (e.g. Shore et al., 2009; Shore et al., 2011).

It would seem that practitioners are the primary group of fashion setters in the field in terms of ‘fashion creation’ and ‘fashion selection’. But, academics and consultants arguably play a significant role in the ‘processing’ phase (convincing fashion followers) and the ‘dissemination’ phase (via promotion in books, journals and consulting activities).

In order to further explore fashion setting and the role of academics in the ‘processing phase’ (i.e. the elaboration of a convincing rhetoric) and ‘dissemination phase’ (i.e. attracting the attention of a mass audience) it is helpful to move beyond the macro-level aggregation of overarching trends (see figure 1) and consider the significance of particular contributions. Using the ‘Publish or Perish’ software (Harzing, 2010) we were able to identify the most influential contributions to the field. A ranking of the most popular work on diversity is provided (see table 2). The ranking derived takes into account three features: the total citations, the average citations per year and the pattern of citation (using a split-half method to add weight to those papers demonstrating sustained citation).

In terms of the actual process employed, we carried out a search on the word ‘diversity’ using the ‘general citations’ function of the Harzing software. This identified the top 1,000 most cited outputs on diversity in rank order. Then, working down from the highest ranked we accessed the work online using various databases in order to exclude work not concerned with workplace diversity (e.g. product diversity, bio-diversity, etc.) and other anomalies. We laddered down until we had identified the 20 most influential contributions to the field. In addition, we cross-checked the

reliability of the citation levels reported for the outputs by using alternative search protocols within the Harzing software (i.e. ‘author-based’ and ‘article-based’ searches). We found that the reported levels of citation for the 20 outputs remained consistent irrespective of the search method employed.

Although the results presented are reliable, there are two limitations of the Publish or Perish software which should be acknowledged. First, given the dynamic nature of publishing, the software provides a snapshot of citations and, as such, it captures a moment in time which may not subsequently reflect the relative popularity of certain outputs. Second, the comparison of recently published and longstanding outputs is difficult. For example, if one compares output A (published in 2001 with 1,000 citations) with output B (appearing in 2005 with 750 citations); A has more total citations than B, but B has a higher average citation level per year. Although the software attempts to accommodate this problem it nevertheless remains difficult to make meaningful comparisons and to rank outputs precisely because it involves assumptions about future citations (e.g. will citations for output B dramatically decline or substantially increase over the next few years?). Notwithstanding these limitations the Publish or Perish software is a useful tool for exploring patterns of academic interest in diversity.

#### Table 2 – About Here

There are two interesting aspects to the results presented in table 2. First, the most heavily cited work (e.g. Milliken and Martins, 1996 with 1,364 citations) is not the earliest work. One might expect the early seminal work (e.g. Thomas, 1990) to be the most cited. Second, and perhaps more importantly, there is a distinct pattern to the

citations of the most influential work. If we look at the early work among the top 20 contributions and compare them to the later ones we can see that there is a discernible difference in terms of publication outlets. All of the early work (i.e. 1990-1991) appeared in 'practitioner-oriented' journals (i.e. Thomas in Harvard Business Review, Cox and Blake in Academy of Management Executive) and as a manager-oriented book (i.e. Loden and Rosener, 1991). Of the remaining 17 'post 1992' publications the greater majority (i.e. 13 of the 17) appeared in 'top-tier academic journals' (eg. Academy of Management Journal, Academy of Management Review, Organization Science, Strategic Management Journal and Journal of Management).

The major implication that can be derived from the temporal sequencing of publication outlets found in table 2 is that practitioner-focused insight pre-dated serious academic engagement rather than the other way around. Moreover, the data contained in table 2 offers further support that the earlier assertion that the advent of the diversity discourse was instigated by practitioners and taken up by academics insofar as the overall trend appears to be from practitioner-driven initiatives (pre-1990) to practitioner-oriented publications (1990-1992) to academically-driven research output (post 1992). This is also consistent with the pattern in figure 2 where interest in diversity among academics increases sharply after the early mainstream practitioner-oriented outputs in 1990 and 1991 (i.e. Thomas, 1990; Cox and Blake, 1991).

The process by which diversity became fashionable is in many ways similar to the 'epidemic' argument made by Gladwell in *The Tipping Point* (2000). Using the example of Hush Puppies shoes, Gladwell explains that sales had been extremely low (30,000 pairs a year) until a tipping point occurred between late 1994 and early 1995 when "a handful of kids in the East Village and Soho" (2000, p4) in New York started to wear them and "Hush Puppies had suddenly become hip in the clubs and bars of

downtown Manhattan” (2000, p3). Then a number of designers started using them as accessories in their fashion shows and sales rocketed: “In 1995, the company sold 430,000 pairs of the classic Hush Puppies, and the next year it sold four times that, and the year after that still more...” (2000, p4). Arguably, although there is a different order of magnitude, the take up of diversity is similar. A handful of anonymous practitioners pre-1990 (like the small group of kids in New York in 1994) were responsible for the ‘creation’ and ‘selection’ phases of the fashion process (i.e. putting together a new idea). Like the fashion designers, a cluster of practitioner-facing academics then became interested in what was happening and provided the ‘processing phase’ (i.e. by giving shape, exposure and credibility to the concept in the early 1990’s). After this, interest in the phenomenon soared during the 1990’s and into the 2000’s.

#### Equality, Diversity and Inclusion as Rhetorical Constructions

Thus far we have discussed the fashion adoption process and the role of key stakeholders. However, what we have not addressed is the attendant rhetorical dynamics. The relative positioning and discursive framing of the various anti-discrimination approaches (e.g. as similar or different, better or worse, new or old) is perhaps central to understanding their respective waves of popularity.

Rhetoric is an integral part of the production and dissemination of management fashions (Abrahamson, 1991). As previously indicated, in relation to the processing phase, it is “the elaboration of a rhetoric that can convince fashion followers that a management technique is both rational and at the forefront of management progress” (Abrahamson, 1996, p267). Beyond this, Abrahamson and Eisenman posit that: “Lexical shifts over time serve to differentiate a fashion from its predecessor, creating a sense of novelty and progress from the earlier to the later fashions” (2008, p 719).



The rhetorical elaboration of ‘newness’ and ‘progress’ are important aspects of adoption. But, a further facet of the process is the accompanying rhetorical positioning of the old fashion. It has been suggested that: “Individuals permanently need new fashions, since old ones are constantly in danger of no longer providing distinction” (Kieser, 1997, p56). Put differently, a particular fashion is displaced when it is seen to be “too worn out to still provide a basis for effective rhetoric” and there is a need for “new fashions in order to make the ruling practise look old fashioned” (Kieser, 1997, p68). In effect, the transition between fashions typically involves the ‘talking up’ of a new fashion and the ‘talking down’ of an old fashion.

This raises the question of whether or not a similar rhetorical process is to be found in anti-discrimination discourses. If we look at the simultaneous decline of the ‘equality discourse’ and the emergence of the ‘diversity discourse’ the transition process can be characterised as one involving a rhetorical positioning of equality-based initiatives as being reactive, ineffectual and ‘not fit for purpose’ with diversity-based approaches depicted as proactive and offering significant added value (eg. Linnehan and Konrad, 1999; Lorbiecki and Jack, 2000) and offering a ‘quick fix’ to improve management competences in handling diversity (Kirby and Harter, 2003). In particular, diversity has been inextricably linked to the business case (eg. Cox and Blake, 1991; Watson, Kumar and Michaelson, 1993) whereby there is an economic rationale for managers to value and manage diversity. Indeed, the rhetorical shift from equality to diversity is exemplified in the title of Kandola, Fullerton and Ahmed’s 1995 paper: *Managing Diversity: Succeeding Where Equal Opportunities Has Failed*.

It is noticeable that the literature promoting diversity and downplaying equality was largely produced between 1990 and 2000. Empirical evidence began to appear that suggested a ‘more nuanced view of the business case for diversity may be appropriate’

(Kochan et al., 2003, p3) so by the mid-2000's the discourse around diversity had significantly changed and had become highly critical of the phenomenon (eg. Noon, 2007; Perriton, 2009; Wrench, 2005; Zanoni and Janssens, 2007). The discussion of what was described at the time as the "fatal flaws of diversity" (Noon, 2007, p773) coincided with the emergence of a positive literature around the notion of inclusion. The positive rhetorical positioning of inclusion is evident in the titles of texts during this period: *The Inclusion Breakthrough: Unleashing the Real Power of Diversity* (Miller and Katz, 2002) and *The Power of Inclusion: Unlock the Potential and Productivity of Your Workforce* (Hyter and Turnock, 2006). Somewhat ironically the case made for a diversity discourse over equality in the 1990's (i.e. leveraging the business case) has been recycled and used as the very thing that inclusion discourse offers over diversity as an advantage in the 2000's. This is epitomised in Bendick, Egan and Lanier's discussion of: "The business case for inclusion, not diversity" (2010, p480).

## DISCUSSION

Our analysis demonstrates that the discourse of diversity has followed the same pattern as that of a management fashion. It has undergone a period of growth (as indicated by the SSCI analysis) and rendered the concept it is designed to replace (equality) into a state of steady decline. In turn its dominance is challenged by a more fashionable concept (inclusion) the rise of which is matched by a flattening and prospective fall of the original concept (diversity). In addition, there is a similarity in terms of the rhetorical strategies employed in order to establish the dominance of the fashionable management solution being proposed. In this process stakeholders seek to identify the distinctiveness of the solution they are proposing and in so doing diminish the value and effectiveness of anything that preceded it. Therefore diversity is presented by

practitioners, consultants and (some) academics as superior to and distinct from equality, and more recently inclusion is being distinguished as the new, progressive step from diversity.

There is some strong support for the idea that the transition between anti-discrimination discourses follows the same rhetorical pattern as that found for management fashions. But, does this mean that these discourses are fashions? Or, does it mean that the use of rhetoric and the processes of adoption are merely similar?

Although the anti-discrimination approaches of diversity and inclusion are akin to management fashions, they are not truly fashions and should not be treated as such because they possess two distinctive features. First, anti-discrimination approaches are fundamentally different to management fashions because of their importance. Discrimination is a pervasive and insidious phenomenon which affects organizations and communities in fundamental and enduring ways. By contrast, management fashions (such as quality circles, business process re-engineering, etc.) do not have the same breadth or depth of impact or evoke the same intensity of reaction from various stakeholders. In this regard, the consequences of discrimination are potentially far more significant.

The second distinctive feature concerns the way that anti-discrimination approaches have the potential to be used in combination with each other, whereas management fashions are, by their very nature, mutually exclusive. Management fashions are designed to run consecutively rather than concurrently insofar as one fashion is made redundant once a new fashion is introduced. In effect, management fashions are diachronic in nature: they are sequential with one intervention following on after another. The same is not necessarily true for anti-discrimination approaches where it is possible to use concurrently more than one approach. For example, it is possible to

have equality-based mechanisms and penalties in combination with diversity-based initiatives. Hence, anti-discrimination approaches can be seen as synchronic because they can co-exist and operate in parallel with each other.

Although anti-discrimination approaches are potentially synchronic, the detrimental consequence of employing, albeit unintentionally, a ‘rhetorically-based fashion discourse’ is that the approaches are presented as diachronic. The deployment of rhetoric means that the ‘talking up’ of a new approach also involves the ‘talking down’ of a pre-existing approach which might be complementary or even synergistic. By dispensing with the rhetorical framing of new anti-discrimination approaches as ‘better’ and instead re-presenting them as ‘different’, it might be possible to move beyond the unhealthy marginalization of valuable approaches simply because they are not fashionable. Previously scholars have called for a more sophisticated approach that moves away from simple dichotomies; for example there have been calls for a constructive compromise (Liff, 1999), a three pronged approach (Dickens, 1999) and a stakeholder approach (Özbilgin and Tatli, 2008). We would concur with these calls, and suggest that for this to be successful there needs to be a break in the discursive pattern we have described above and a shift in approach from consultants, practitioners and academics in terms of selling, using and conceptualising anti-discrimination solutions.

## CONCLUSIONS

The bibliometric analysis of trends, combined with the subsequent investigation of specific citation patterns, has enabled us to make three contributions to extant literature on equality, diversity and inclusion. First, we have demonstrated that anti-discrimination approaches undergo cycles of popularity. Moreover, we have revealed the rhetorically-embedded and fashion-like qualities of these approaches.

Second, we highlighted the problems associated with treating equality, diversity and inclusion approaches as if they were fashions. In particular, we have highlighted the need to recognise that these different anti-discrimination solutions could be beneficial in combination rather than in isolation, and so a discourse that seeks to establish the superiority of one over another means some legitimate and valuable arguments become marginalised and suppressed. Rather than seeing the rationales for equality, diversity and inclusion as mutually exclusive, it could be more constructive to focus upon the points of commonality, overlap and compatibility.

Finally, our analysis enables us to make some tentative predictions about future approaches to addressing discrimination in employment. Extrapolating from previous trends we would expect the inclusion discourse to continue to grow in popularity and the rhetorical distancing from diversity, which has recently begun to emerge (e.g. Oswick, 2010; Shore et al., 2011), to lead to a concomitant decline in the diversity discourse. Based upon the nature of the patterns of take up of previous approaches, we might also expect the next dominant approach after inclusion to be instigated by a handful of practitioners, then spotted by some practitioner-facing academics, and then embraced as an area of widespread academic interest. However, analyses such as ours might help academics and practitioners to become aware of the existing cyclical, fashion-oriented rhetoric that has characterized the field over forty decades, and might encourage them to break free and simultaneously engage with a repertoire of approaches.

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**FIGURE 1**

**Bibliometric Analysis of Equality, Diversity and Inclusion Articles (1970 and 2009)**

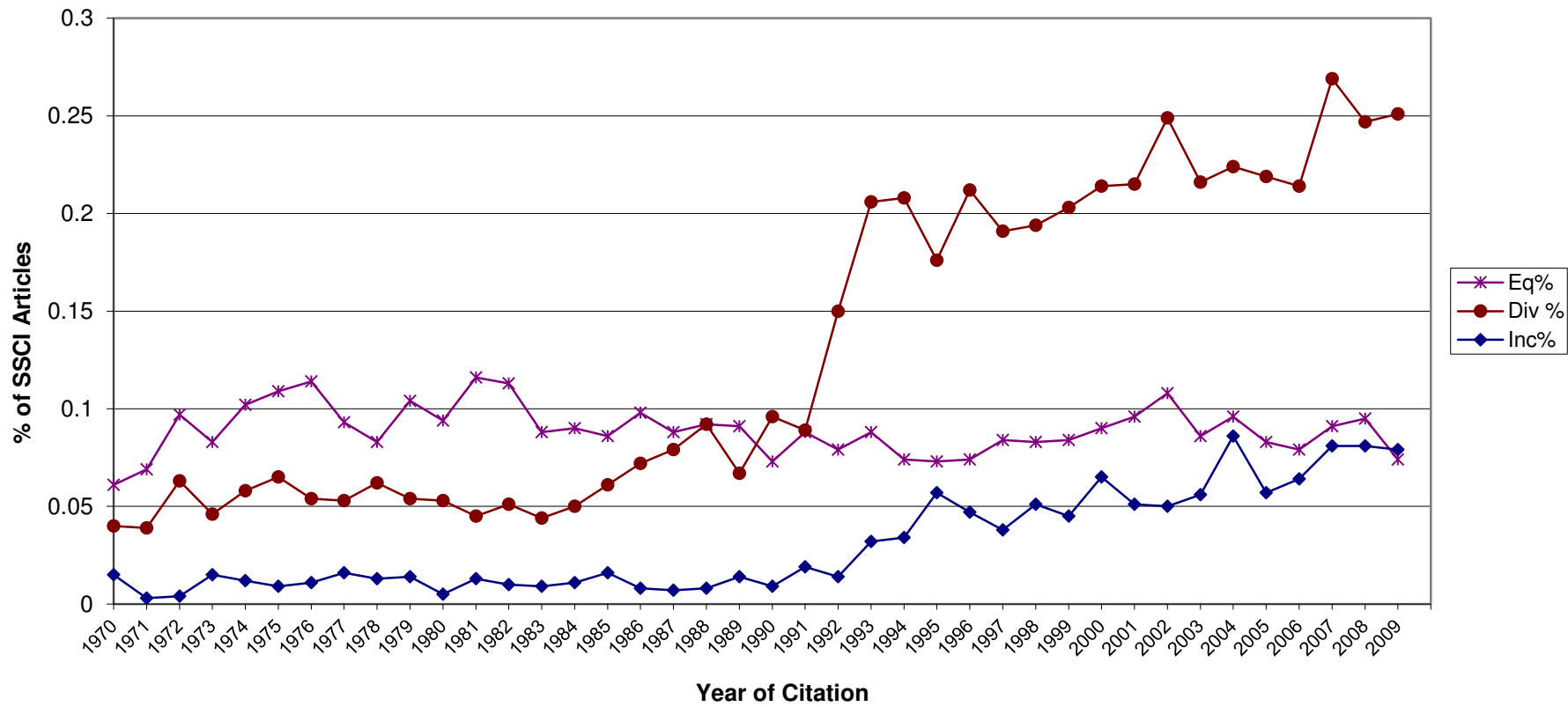


TABLE I – BREAKDOWN OF JOURNAL ARTICLES ON EQUALITY, DIVERSITY AND INCLUSION APPEARING IN THE SSCI BETWEEN 1970 AND 2009

<b>Year</b>	<b>Total No. of SSCI Articles</b>	<b>No. of SSCI Articles on Equality (%)</b>	<b>No. of SSCI Articles on Diversity (%)</b>	<b>No. of SSCI Articles on Inclusion (%)</b>
1970	87,163	53 (0.061)	35 (0.040)	13 (0.015)
1971	70,112	49 (0.069)	27 (0.039)	2 (0.003)
1972	67,034	65 (0.097)	42 (0.063)	3 (0.004)
1973	67,554	56 (0.083)	31 (0.046)	10 (0.015)
1974	85,166	87 (0.102)	49 (0.058)	10 (0.012)
1975	98,166	107 (0.109)	64 (0.065)	9 (0.009)
1976	122,108	139 (0.114)	66 (0.054)	13 (0.011)
1977	126,310	117 (0.093)	67 (0.053)	20 (0.016)
1978	127,241	106 (0.083)	79 (0.062)	17 (0.013)
1979	124,200	129 (0.104)	67 (0.054)	17 (0.014)
1980	118,072	111 (0.094)	63 (0.053)	6 (0.005)
1981	120,367	140 (0.116)	54 (0.045)	16 (0.013)
1982	125,980	142 (0.113)	64 (0.051)	13 (0.010)
1983	126,791	112 (0.088)	56 (0.044)	12 (0.009)
1984	121,432	109 (0.090)	61 (0.050)	13 (0.011)
1985	122,128	105 (0.086)	75 (0.061)	20 (0.016)
1986	129,122	127 (0.098)	93 (0.072)	10 (0.008)
1987	121,612	107 (0.088)	96 (0.079)	9 (0.007)
1988	116,384	107 (0.092)	107 (0.092)	9 (0.008)
1989	120,779	110 (0.091)	81 (0.067)	17 (0.014)
1990	120,985	88 (0.073)	116 (0.096)	11 (0.009)
1991	122,806	108 (0.088)	109 (0.089)	24 (0.019)
1992	125,931	99 (0.079)	189 (0.150)	18 (0.014)
1993	129,324	114 (0.088)	267 (0.206)	41(0.032)
1994	127,848	95 (0.074)	266 (0.208)	43 (0.034)
1995	144,394	106 (0.073)	254 (0.176)	82 (0.057)
1996	147,685	110 (0.074)	313 (0.212)	69 (0.047)
1997	142,705	120 (0.084)	273 (0.191)	54 (0.038)
1998	141,930	118 (0.083)	275 (0.194)	72 (0.051)
1999	143,631	120 (0.084)	291 (0.203)	65 (0.045)
2000	145,280	131 (0.090)	311 (0.214)	92 (0.065)
2001	150,850	145 (0.096)	325 (0.215)	77 (0.051)
2002	135,692	147 (0.108)	338 (0.249)	68 (0.050)
2003	152,906	131 (0.086)	331 (0.216)	85 (0.056)
2004	132,707	128 (0.096)	297 (0.224)	114 (0.086)
2005	170,845	142 (0,083)	375 (0.219)	97 (0.057)
2006	164,804	131 (0.079)	353 (0.214)	106 (0.064)
2007	162,272	147 (0.091)	436 (0.269)	131 (0.081)
2008	199,109	190 (0.095)	491 (0.247)	163 (0.081)
2009	225,187	167 (0.074)	566 (0.251)	177 (0.079)
Totals	5,184,612	4,615 (0.086)	7,453 (0.139)	1,828 (0.034)



**Table 2 – Summary of the Most Cited Work on Diversity**

Harzing Ranking	Total Citations	Citations Per Year	Full Reference
1	220	110.00	Kirton, G. and Kirton, G. and A.M. Greene (2010). <i>The Dynamics of Managing Diversity: A Critical Approach</i> . (3 <sup>rd</sup> Edition) Oxford: Elsevier Butterworth-Heinemann.
2	1,364	85.25	Milliken, F. and Martins, L. (1996) 'Searching for common threads: Understanding the multiple effects of diversity in organizational groups', <i>Academy of Management Review</i> , 21, 2, pp. 402-433.
3	951	45.29	Cox, T. and S. Blake (1991). 'Managing cultural diversity: Implications for organizational competitiveness', <i>Academy of Management Executive</i> , 5, pp. 45-56.
4	427	20.33	Loden, M. and Rosener, J.B. (1991) <i>Workforce America! Managing Employee Diversity</i> . Boston, MA: Irwin.
5	679	61.73	Reagans, R. and Zuckerman, E.W. (2001) 'Networks, diversity, and productivity: The social capital of corporate R&D teams', <i>Organization Science</i> , 12, 4, pp. 502-517.
6	618	44.14	Lau, D.C. and Murnighan, J.K. (1998) 'Demographic diversity and faultlines: The compositional dynamics of organizational groups', <i>Academy of Management Review</i> , 23, 2, pp. 325-340.
7	550	42.31	Simons, T., Pelled, L.H., and Smith, K.A. (1999) 'Making use of difference: diversity, debate, and decision comprehensiveness in top management teams', <i>Academy of Management Journal</i> , 42, 6, pp. 662-673.
8	553	25.14	Thomas, R. R. (1990) 'From affirmative action to affirming diversity', <i>Harvard Business Review</i> , March-April, pp.107-117.
9	439	36.58	Richard, O.C. (2000) 'Racial diversity, business strategy, and firm performance: A resource-based view', <i>Academy of Management Journal</i> , 43, 2, pp. 164-177.
10	367	20.39	Goodstein, J., Gautam, K., and Boeker, W. (1994) 'The effects of board size and diversity on strategic change', <i>Strategic Management Journal</i> , 15, 3, pp. 241-250.
11	473	27.82	Jackson, S.E., May, K.E., and Whitney, K. (1995) 'Understanding the dynamics of diversity in decision-making teams', in R.A. Guzzo and E. Salas (Eds), <i>Team decision-making effectiveness in organizations</i> . San Francisco: Jossey- Bass.
12	437	48.56	Jackson, S.E., Joshi, A., and Erhardt, N.L. (2003) 'Recent research on team and organizational diversity: SWOT analysis and implications', <i>Journal of Management</i> , 29, 6, pp. 801-830.
13	418	32.15	Knight, D., Pearce, C.L., Olian, J.D., Sims, H.P., Smith, K.A., and Flood, P. (1999) 'Top management team diversity, group process, and strategic consensus', <i>Strategic Management Journal</i> , 20, 5, pp. 445-465.
14	321	21.40	Robinson, G. and Dechant, K. (1997) 'Building a business case for diversity', <i>Academy of Management Executive</i> , 11, 3, pp. 45-56.
15	350	38.89	Kochan, T., Bezrukova, K., Ely, R., Jackson, S., Joshi, A., Jehn, K., Leonard, J., Levine, L., and Thomas, D. (2003). 'The effects of diversity on business performance: report of the diversity research network', <i>Human Resource Management</i> , 42, pp. 3-21.
16	272	22.67	Kilduff, M., Angelmar, R., and Mehra, A. (2000) 'Top management-team diversity and firm performance; Examining the role of cognitions', <i>Organization Science</i> , 11, 1, pp. 21-34.
17	265	17.67	Gomez-Meija, L.R. and Palich, L.E. (1997) 'Cultural diversity and the performance of multinational firms', <i>Journal of International Business</i> , 28, 2, pp. 309-335.
18	237	29.63	Thomas, D.A. (2004) 'Diversity as strategy', <i>Harvard Business Review</i> , 82, 9, pp. 98-108.
19	218	24.22	Erhardt, N.L., Werbel, J.D., and Shrader, C. B. (2003) 'Board of director diversity and firm financial performance', <i>Corporate Governance: An International Review</i> , 11, 2, pp. 102-111.
20	227	22.70	Ashkanasy, N.M., Hartel, C.E.J., and Daus, C.S. (2002) 'Diversity and emotion: The new frontiers in organizational behaviour research', <i>Journal of Management</i> , 28, 3, pp. 307-338.

