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Asset, liability, possibility: Metaphors of human difference and the business case for diversity

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Abstract

Purpose – This analysis draws on interviews with 19 self-identified US diversity consultants and 94 diversity statements posted on corporate websites. The findings challenge existing literature that characterizes the business case for diversity as monolithic and wholly problematic for the way it constructs understandings of human difference. The authors accomplish this using metaphor analysis to demonstrate how business case arguments incorporate three metaphorical systems for thinking and speaking about human differences – as asset, as liability and as possibility. Given this diversity of metaphors, the business case does not construct human difference in a monolithic way, but in a variety of ways that both challenge and sustain problematic treatments of difference. The authors

Published in *Equality, Diversity and Inclusion: An International Journal* 37:7 (2018), pp. 664-682.

doi:10.1108/EDI-05-2017-0114

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Submitted 16 May 2017; revised 9 October 2017 & 23 January 2018; accepted 18 March 2018.

argue scholars and practitioners should attend to these nuanced difference within the discourse of the business case, and more carefully consider how these metaphorical systems both enable and constrain the design and execution of diversity work in organizations.

The paper aims to discuss these issues.

Design/methodology/approach – The analysis draws on two data sets: initial interviews with 19 self-identified US diversity consultants analyzed using metaphor analysis. To triangulate findings, the metaphorical framework was applied to 94 diversity statements posted on corporate websites.

Findings – Business case arguments operate according to three root metaphors of human difference: human difference as asset, human difference as liability and human difference as possibility. This challenges existing literature that treats the business case as a monolithic discourse.

Research limitations/implications – This analysis offers the three metaphorical system and highlights the “constrained capacity” of each. This framework offers an analytical and practical tool for scholars and practitioners, enabling them to more thoroughly understand and respond to their unique organizational and socio-historical context. It also provides a way to analyze how concepts of difference are mobilized across social and historical contexts.

Practical implications – The findings offer the “constrained capacity” that is, the strategic limitations and possibilities for practitioners who use the business case in their diversity work. This enables more skilled and ethically informed diversity initiatives. Social implications – The findings offer insight into the subtle ways that hierarchies of human difference embedded in US history are subtly reinforced and made present through language. This enables social justice workers to better challenge problematic constructions of human difference and create new understandings when needed.

Originality/value – This piece makes two significant original contributions to existing literature. It offers more nuance to both critical and uncritical analyses of the business case by showing the diversity of business case assumptions about human difference as demonstrated in three different metaphorical systems and highlighting the constrained capacity of three different metaphorical systems. It offers unique analysis grounded in contemporary discourses, but correlated to historical systems of thought. This enables empirical identification of how certain types of thinking about human difference move across socio-historical contexts.

Keywords: Business case for diversity, Corporate diversity initiative, Diversity consulting, Metaphor analysis

While traditional managerial approaches to diversity work have effectively modeled key features of diversity work (Mor Barak, 1999), and focused on measuring the effects of diversity work (Roberson, 2016), discursive approaches to organization bring a different epistemological approach to diversity. Among these are analyses that expand beyond questions of how organizations address existing identities, to instead consider how organizational practices actively constitute gender, race, sexuality and class, as meaningful identity categories (Acker, 1990; Essers and Benschop, 2009; Janssens and Zanoni, 2005). This growing body of scholarship offers theoretical tools for analyzing the complex ways discourses of diversity constitute what diversity means and the corollary possibilities for meaningful social change in organizational contexts (e.g. Janssens and Zanoni, 2005; Litvin, 2006; Oseen, 1997; Prasad et al., 2010; Swan, 2010). In particular, critical diversity studies – which critically analyze power, social and organizational context, and essentialist concepts of identity (Zanoni et al., 2010) – highlight how diversity strategies unintentionally reinforce problematic concepts of human difference and corollary problems of inequality. This critique is especially strong when addressing the business case for diversity – the connection of human differences to organizational performance and financial success. Many scholars have concluded that business case arguments exacerbate rather than challenge inequality (Kirby and Harter, 2001; Kossek et al., 2006; Litvin, 2006; Martin, 2000; Oseen, 1997; Perriton, 2009; Prasad et al., 2006).

Our analysis challenges this conclusion using a close reading of assumptions about human difference embedded in business case arguments espoused by US-based diversity consultants and in corporate diversity statements. We identify three metaphorical systems (Lakoff and Johnson, 2003) for thinking and speaking about human differences: difference as liability, as asset, and as possibility. Although these systems seamlessly merge in everyday language, each one subtly constructs human difference in unique ways. Our analysis of these metaphorical assumptions challenges characterizations of the business case as a singular discursive tool with predetermined outcomes. Instead, we offer diversity professionals and scholars a more complex understanding of the business case as a diverse set of tools; each tool with its own constrained capacity offering unique risks, possibilities, and limitations.

We begin by reviewing current trends in the literature addressing the business case for diversity. Our analysis of business case arguments from 19 US based diversity consultants and 94 diversity statements taken from the top 100 companies listed in the 2010 Fortune 500 list (<http://money.cnn.com>) follows and establishes the three metaphorical systems: asset, liability, and possibility. The discussion offers insights into the possibilities and limitations of each discourse and illustrates how these metaphorical systems can mobilize concepts and problems of human difference across socio-historical contexts. Ultimately, we argue against a monolithic critique of the business case and instead offer a complex interpretation that encourages diversity practitioners and scholars to acknowledge the constrained capacity of three different metaphorical systems the underlay business case arguments.

What is the business case for diversity?

The business case for diversity is a discursive strategy that connects human differences to an organization's bottom line. While this most often reflects financial gain, the business case may also connect with other primary organizational objectives. For example, non-profits might focus on the number of clients served or a sustainability organization might measure reduction of waste. Business case arguments generally make three types of claims about the value of diversity: improved relationships between organization and external constituents (e.g. improved public relations or access to demographic markets), improved employee participation (e.g. improved engagement and productivity or decreased turnover or lawsuits), and improved products and services (e.g. improved innovation or creativity, or demographically specific products). Regardless of the claims, both scholars and practitioners heavily debate the truth of the business case and diversity's impact on the bottom line. Research offers inconclusive and contradictory findings regarding the financial benefit of diversity (Healy et al., 2010; Ogbonna and Harris, 2006; Kochan et al., 2003) as well as a growing list of conditions that mediate such benefit. For example, the framing of training rationales (Kidder et al., 2004), prevailing attitudes and post-program support (Sanchez and Medkik, 2004), the pre-assessment used to design the program (Roberson et al., 2003),

the social identities of the employees (Tran et al., 2011) and conditions of growth vs downsizing (Richard, 2000) have all been found to mediate the financial benefit of diversity.

Rather than engage the debate of when or if the business case is true, our analysis approaches the business case as a discourse and explores the possibilities and constraints that result from drawing on that discourse. Thus, we use a Foucauldian (Foucault, 1990, 1995) style of discourse analysis that focuses on the circulation of ideas among a particular group or society. Foucault's work emphasizes that discourses (or circulated ideas) do not reflect the truths of a society, but constitute the truths of a society. Perhaps more importantly, ideas that are normalized and accepted as true set parameters for what is possible. For example, if differences are constituted as biological in a discourse, then the possibilities and paths for achieving equality differ from the possibilities and paths that result with an understanding of difference as socially constructed. Thus, discourse may not constitute physical body differences, but it constitutes the meaning we associate with those physical differences, and consequently conditions the ways we interact with and make sense of them (Mumby, 2011). Part of our work here is to illustrate how those discourses surface in everyday talk and how they potentially condition the ways human differences, and consequently diversity initiatives, are constituted in everyday interaction.

Janssens and Zanoni (2005) illustrate one way meanings of human difference are constituted in each organizational context. They argue that "organizations produce their own understandings of diversity and manage diversity in ways that are in line with those understandings" (p. 327). Their study demonstrates how the type of service provided by an organization influenced how human differences were acknowledged, understood, and addressed among diversity initiatives. This notion that discourses of diversity are shaping and coloring organizational understandings of human differences as pieces of organizational puzzles (not just trying to find the best use of human differences as already fully formed pieces), demonstrates why a complex understanding of the diverse assumptions about human difference embedded in the business case is critical. Given the wide spread use of the business case, assumptions about human difference embedded in it have the power to constitute difference and fundamentally shape organizational and social contexts.

How does the business case constitute difference?

We are not the first to examine the constitutive potential of the business case. Several scholars have juxtaposed the implications of organizational strategies that use a discourse of valuing diversity with those that use a discourse of managing diversity that aligns with the business case (Harter and Kirby, 2003; Kirby and Harter, 2001; Martin, 2000; Prasad et al., 2006). These studies illustrate that discourses of managing diversity reduce people to resources requiring management, rather than focusing on diverse human experiences. Others argue that the business case for diversity appropriates essentialist notions of difference in service of market and capital priorities that treat diversity as worthwhile only for its bottom line value. They argue that this treatment of difference reinforces stereotypes and severely curtails the potential for social justice (Kossek et al., 2006; Litvin, 2006; Martin, 2000). Accordingly, Perriton (2009) has argued that the business case actually closes, rather than opens up opportunities for social justice and the advancement of women in organizations. Ultimately, these arguments claim that financial discourses are fundamentally limited in their capacity to support or sustain meaningful change.

We find these critiques valid but incomplete because they overlook the complexity of the business case. Dobusch (2017) made a similar critique of the existing literature, suggesting that discourses of diversity “are far less driven by one-dimensional motives of marketability than commonly assumed” (p. 1644). Likewise, in their analysis of the business case as used in UK voluntary organizations, Tomlinson and Schwabenland (2010) advocated for a less bifurcated approach to financial and social justice approaches. Significantly, both of these studies grounded their claims in qualitative interviews with public organizations (governmental/university and non-profit respectively) using data collected through interviews with organizational members who actively navigate diversity on a day-to-day basis.

Our own analysis combines this call for complex understandings of the business case with Litvin’s (2002) critical analysis of the business case for diversity. In addition to explicating assumptions embedded in the business case, Litvin illustrated how the narrative of the business case is an “institutional thought structure [...] characterized by a set of basic assumptions taken to be ‘axiomatic’ ” (p. 170). In other

words, she argues that the narrative of the business case (as a sense-making structure) is assumed, accepted, and evoked in ways that predetermine both the problems and solutions of organizational diversity. Her work acknowledges the precarious role this creates for diversity professionals, because the business case assumes particular problems before the engagement even begins and precludes real analysis of problems and contextually based solutions. Taking her point and the complexity of the business case together, our analysis addresses the multiple “institutional thought structures” of human differences embedded in the business case, as well as the multiple assumptions about problems and blind spots those thought structures offer. In doing so, we follow Mumby’s (2011), admonition that “Good discourse studies problematize constitutive processes by unpacking the complexities of (often contradictory and indeterminate) meanings that provide the substance of organizational life” (p. 1151).

Constructing difference vs constructing identities

Equally important, we believe that more attention should be paid to the analytical distinction between people, identities and human differences. Arguments regarding the way people are treated in an organization are analytically distinct from arguments regarding the way human difference is constituted in an organization – although the latter surely impacts how people are treated. Moreover, we distinguish identities from human difference. We treat identities, such as race, gender, nationalities, sexual orientation, and others as discursive constructs that offer a set of expectations, norms, and experiences associated with a social group. When taken up or performed in interaction, these expectations, norms, and experiences actively and materially constitute identities as “real,” and impose their corollary possibilities and limitations on individuals’ subject positions (Mease, 2011). On the other hand, we treat human difference as the concept upon which the recognition and constitution of any particular identity hinges. For example, a concept of human difference grounded in biological determinism will manifest race and gender identities very differently from race and gender identities grounded in a concept of human difference as a contextually contingent social construction. As

analytic devices, identities (such as racial or gender identities) are a particular instantiation of a concept of human difference. Implicit in this analysis is our own concept of human differences as constituted through organizational and social discourse and practice (Acker, 1990; Ashcraft, 2011; Ashcraft and Mumby, 2003).

Historical emergence of the business case

It would, however, be remiss to examine organizational constructions of human difference without attending to the social and historical context of the organizational discourse we analyze. Ideas of human differences (and the corollary problems associated with those idea of difference) have changed at both social and organizational levels and vary across cultural and global contexts. Moreover, discourses of the business case are inevitably shaped by governmental regulation and broader social norms that vary across history and geopolitical location (Dobbin, 2009).

Organizational understandings of human difference have changed drastically over the late twentieth century in the USA, the geopolitical context from which our data is taken. Prior to the Civil Rights movement, discrimination was a common organizational treatment of human differences (Dobbin, 2009). This normal practice of discrimination (was) sustained (by) early modern discourses about human differences as natural, rigid, and discrete categories, discernable via observation, and correlated with particular skills and abilities (Eze, 1997). People were thought to be naturally “better suited” for different types of jobs based on identity groups, and those jobs and identities were hierarchical. By the early 1970s, discrimination was no longer legally acceptable as the standard practice of difference in organizations, and the organizational treatment of human difference shifted to include compliance – on both legal and moral grounds – in the wake of civil rights, Affirmative Action, and EEO (Dobbin, 2009; Lynch, 2002). As the context shifted, so did underlying concepts of human difference. Difference became meaningful to organizations primarily for the way it emerged in discriminatory relationships that constrained individuals’ possibilities for advancement and success. Rather than emerging from the individual, differences were deemed relevant to organizations when they emerged in discriminatory organizational

and interpersonal relationships. As legal mandates against discrimination lost power in the 1980s (Carnevale and Stone, 1995; Dobbin, 2009) consultants began to argue that improved inclusion and treatment of human differences could improve organizational performance, a claim now known as “the business case for diversity.” Using the discourse of the business case, diversity initiatives have expanded to include any identity group that enhances or hinders financial possibility, including personality, tenure, geographic region, etc. (Mease, 2016).

While we have demonstrated that some scholars critique the discourse of the business case for reducing human differences to organizational resources, it is our goal to unpack the nuanced concepts of human difference present in business case arguments. Herein lies our primary research question: as the business case for diversity continues to play a dominant role in organizational diversity initiatives, in what ways does it both challenge and sustain varied concepts of human difference and what are the possibilities and limitations, or what we call the constrained capacity, of each of those concepts? We believe that answering this question will help scholars and practitioners to craft stronger arguments and strategies that address the diverse array of challenges surrounding human difference in organizations and to avoid imposing problems of a particular context on altogether different social or historical contexts.

Methods

Methods for interviews

The interviews were part of a broader study of obstacles and difficulties that diversity consultants encountered in their work and the strategies they developed to address those obstacles and difficulties. The 19 participants self-identified as diversity consultants and were identified through personal, social, and professional networks, internet searches for “diversity consulting,” and snowball sampling. We interviewed consultants because of their constitutive role in developing diversity work across organizations and industries and because of their role as organizational outsiders who are still deeply embedded in organizations. Participants self-identified as men, women, white,

black, Hispanic, gay and straight consultants who worked across industries, including corporate, not-for-profit, government and education institutions.

Interview questions focused on consultants' personal and professional histories, what they had learned from their work experiences, obstacles they faced, and how they coped with obstacles. Interviews lasted 50–100 minutes, with the average lasting 60 minutes. The first author and one research assistant transcribed the interviews resulting in 267 pages of single-spaced data. The data were thematically coded paragraph-by-paragraph by the first author using an open coding method that resulted in 150 unique codes. The interviews were not designed to focus on the business case, but the business case emerged early as a fractured and complex discursive tool that consultants strategically deployed in a variety of ways and consequently became a larger focus in later interviews.

For this study, we isolated the data associated with the single code “business case” and recoded it to focus on the assumptions about human differences that were implied in each statement. To capture these implied assumptions, we used a metaphor analysis. Scholars across disciplines have demonstrated that metaphors are more than simple linguistic trends; they are foundations of thinking, understanding and acting. Hogler et al. (2008) claim that “metaphor is the birth of meaning” (p. 400) that uses aesthetics to bridge one’s objective world and subjective experience. Lakoff and Johnson (2003) further argue that “most of our conceptual system is metaphorical in nature” and this influences “how we perceive, how we think, and what we do” (p. 4). For Lakoff and Johnson, this power manifests in metaphorical systems, a body of connected metaphors that derive from a root metaphor. The root metaphor that anchors the metaphorical system surfaces through derivative metaphors expressed in everyday talk, even when the root metaphor is not directly spoken. For example, the notion of providing students with the “best value,” “marketing” to future students, “advertising” a major, or suggesting that faculty “sell” their courses to students, are all individual metaphors that compose a metaphorical system based on the root metaphor of students as customers – even if they are never named as such. Through close analysis of language, scholars can find the underlying root metaphor that holds a series of statements together.

We examine metaphorical systems as a structuring aspect of discourse. While we espouse a Foucauldian concept of discourse as the ideas circulated in a particular group or society, we refer to communication exchanges, including mundane and everyday talk as a place to trace those ideas and identify how discourse shapes human thought and behavior (Fairclough and Wodak, 1997). Our goal here is to trace the discourse in human sensemaking (as demonstrated in interviews) to identify how metaphors of human differences become real artifacts of human interaction, and consequently shape organization and society. Thus, by identifying the underlying metaphorical systems that structure the discourse surrounding concepts of difference, this analysis unpacks the way the discourses of the business case both create and extinguish possibilities for thinking about difference, and consequent possibilities for constituting and executing diversity initiatives.

We arrived at metaphorical analysis through an iterative process. At first we thought the assumptions about human difference would correlate with source of financial impact so we coded accordingly. Although this arrived at a comprehensive coding scheme (e.g. improved organizational society relationship, improved employee participation and improved products and services), the assumptions about human difference were not consistent within each category. Through examination of shared and conflicting assumptions about difference across the three areas of financial impact, we began to see the three metaphors cutting across categories. Thus, the first author recoded the isolated business case data according to three metaphorical systems: human difference as asset, human difference as liability, and human difference as possibility. Having found that these three metaphorical systems fully accounted for the assumptions of the business case arguments present in the interview data, both authors sought to apply them to a second empirical data set with the goal of enhancing empirical validity of these categories and engaging in a dialogic sharpening of our context sensitive analytical framework.

Methods for diversity statements

Our second data set includes diversity statements from websites of 2010 Fortune 100 of US American corporations (<http://money.cnn.com>). The focus on US American corporations aligns with the social

and historical context of the diversity consultants we interviewed. Although the consultants worked across many industries, our focus on corporate for-profit websites was prompted by our narrowed focus on the business case for diversity.

The second author collected the data using the home page search features of each Fortune 100 organizations' website using the terms "diversity," "multiculturalism," and "inclusion." We found relevant content on 94 of the 100 company sites resulting in roughly 115 pages of single-spaced text. In order to parallel our analysis of diversity consultant interviews, we isolated "business case" data by independently reading all of the statements and identifying claims, examples, or anecdotes reflecting the "business case" or any connection of human differences to financial benefit or organizational function. We agreed that 71 of the 94 diversity statements contained such statements. Each author independently revisited this subset of data, coding for each of the three metaphorical systems. We compared our analyses and resolved discrepancies to ensure that we had reliably accounted for all statements according to the three metaphorical systems. Discussion of discrepancies served to refine the three metaphorical systems. This process not only confirmed the three metaphorical systems, the discussions began to highlight the link between the metaphorical systems and the socio-historical concepts of human difference.

The analysis that follows proceeds in two steps. The first section presents each of the three metaphorical systems. Having established these categories and their complications we then move to a discussion of the significance of these findings for diversity practitioners and scholars.

Analysis

While existing analyses of the business case have demonstrated how business case arguments are formed (Litvin, 2002) our analysis of the discourse focuses specifically on the assumptions about human differences that underpin these arguments. These assumptions reveal the implicit institutionalized concepts or "truths" regarding human difference that constrain how organizational actors conceptualize the problems and solutions of diversity work. Our analysis indicates that

the assumptions about human differences embedded in business case arguments fall into three major metaphorical systems: difference as asset, difference as liability, and difference as possibility. We begin by offering a basic and brief explanation of these three metaphors and the constitutive and conflictual stakes of these metaphors. A summary of this discussion can be found in **Table I**. We then turn to a discussion of the “constrained capacity” of each metaphorical system, the potential for metaphorical systems to mobilize concepts of difference across socio-historical contexts, and the analytic and practical power of metaphorical systems for scholar and practitioners.

Table I. Three metaphorical systems of difference

	<i>Difference as asset</i>	<i>Difference as liability</i>	<i>Difference as possibility</i>
Difference manifests in	Stable community	Relationships	Emerging/becoming
Difference manifests when	There are groups with shared knowledge and perspectives	Conflict disrupts organizational relationships and processes	Perspectives merge and reshape innovative ideas, processes, and products
Categories of difference based on	Social historical categories	Any classification that affects organizational processes	Categories are not as important as multitude of perspectives
Corresponds with	Discourses of discrimination	Discourses of compliance	Newly emerging discourses
Diversity work will	Access and leverage group specific knowledges	Keep employees engaged and enhance public reputation	Enable difference to integrate into novel innovations
Diversity initiatives focus on	A workforce that matches and represents consumer markets or publics	Creating the conditions that all employees can be successful in	Building any kind of diversity and the conditions for input and collaboration

Difference as asset

The metaphorical system of difference as asset suggests that individual employees possess difference, and organizations benefit financially by accessing or leveraging those differences. For example one consultant explained that diverse employees provide access to diverse markets:

If your organization is diverse and inclusive people are going to bring all of who they are to the table, bring all interests, and thoughts, and ideas, and needs, and wants, and those will translate to diverse communities that are potential customers.

By conceptualizing human difference as shared “interests, and thoughts, and ideas, and needs, and wants” of individual employees that correlate with potential markets, the consultant implies that some employees share this “asset” that the organization leverages to reach certain markets. Likewise, UnitedHealth Group¹ claims, “We encourage a variety of thoughts and perspectives, and a workforce that reflects the diversity of our customers and markets”. Their focus on a diverse workforce aligns the “thoughts and perspectives” of employees with the “customers and markets” that will purchase their products, again positioning difference as providing an asset that is leveraged to sell products. Although subtle, these difference as asset arguments posit a concept of human difference in which characteristics of groups are relatively stable across a group, such that a person of one identity is assumed to have shared qualities with others in their group. Moreover, this idea of human difference aligns with the notion of difference embedded in discourses of difference associated with the era of discrimination, which we described as natural, rigid, and discrete categories, discernable via observation, and correlated with particular skills and abilities.

Perhaps more telling is that some business case arguments remove difference from the person, making it a moveable asset that can be

1. Diversity and inclusion, available at: <http://unitedhealthgroup.mondosearch.com> (accessed November 1, 2010).

integrated directly into a product. As one consultant explained, “if you are Avon, you can’t sell makeup to just white women. You have to be able to sell worldwide, you have to understand skin tone, you have to sell it; brand it differently.” In this example, human difference as an asset is added to traditionally white formulations of makeup, creating a new product that reaches new markets. Again, human difference is significant to the extent that it reflects shared characteristics (e.g., skin tone) and values (e.g., standards of beauty) that can be identified, produced and ultimately sold to customers.

However, difference as asset does not simply reflect existing cultural groups and characteristics; it constitutes them as “real” and relevant to both the organization and society. This can be seen in ConocoPhillips claim that their “strategic partnerships with five diverse professional organizations” help “[t]o provide further access to best practices, innovative thinking, and talent.”² These groups include African-Americans, Asian-Americans, Hispanics and “female professional communities” (see note 2). In this case, the organization not only accesses the knowledge and skills of employees who “have” human difference, the organization constitutes what differences count as an asset by creating particular groups as well as shared values, knowledge, and skill by creating spaces in which group specific knowledge and skills are established, maintained, shared, and then made available to organizations.

Thus, the metaphorical system of difference as asset shows up as something that is possessed by an employee or integrated into a product to make it more valuable. The metaphor requires a concept of difference in which cultural groups have predictable, consistent, and shared values, knowledge, or experience that organizations must access to tailor products, services, and processes for specific cultural groups. By leveraging this asset to build products and offer services that they can then sell to a diverse audience, organizations further reinforce the discrete shared knowledge and values of different identity groups.

2. Diversity and inclusion, available at: www.conocophillips.com/EN/susdev/our-people/diversity/Pages/index.aspx (accessed May 1, 2011).

Difference as liability

The liability metaphor emphasizes the notion that human differences are meaningful to the extent that they become costly by interrupting typical organizational processes. For example, one consultant who worked primarily with legal firms explained the importance of measuring diversity because “clients are starting to ask questions about diversity,” demonstrating that a lack of diversity could hinder development of a client base. In another public relations argument, one consultant explained:

[I]n the US the big return on investment is public relations [...] even if it’s not affecting your business, you’ll find that they do a superficial diversity initiative so that they can have one. Cause otherwise they’re going to be roasted toasted.

This consultant later offered the example of “the advertising industry that was lambasted by the African American groups for their complete lack of diversity or representation.” This metaphorical system of liability is not limited to consumer markets. Procter & Gamble’s³ statement acknowledged the importance of addressing difference as a liability in labor relations by stating that their “Affinity Networks” help “promote an open, welcoming and inclusive culture in the company that provides advancement for everyone”. The emphasis on specific characteristics and specific markets (that surfaces when difference is an asset) is replaced by a goal of “advancement for everyone.”

In financial terms, assets and liabilities are negatives and positives on the same balance sheet, however, the concept of human difference changes significantly when it moves from asset to liability. Not only does the positive value disappear, the shared knowledge, values and other experiences disappear as well. Instead, human difference only becomes recognized for the ways it impedes relational understanding, engagement and collaboration that are crucial to organizational functioning. According to this metaphorical system, difference is done well

3. Diversity and inclusion, available at: www.pg.com/en_US/company/purpose_people/diversity_inclusion.shtml (accessed May 1, 2011).

to the extent that it does not make itself known and does not surface in organizational relationships and processes. The shift here is significant: difference is no longer something one has – it is not a characteristic of a person or product. When difference is spoken of as a liability, it is fundamentally embedded in relationships. Perhaps more importantly and problematically, business case arguments that use difference as liability assume that these relational manifestations of difference are negative. This notion of difference parallels discourses of compliance that emerged after the Civil Right Movement in the USA, where difference is acknowledged primarily for the way it emerged in discriminatory relationships that constrained individuals' possibilities for advancement and success.

As a corollary effect, any difference that affects organizational processes can be constituted as significant to diversity according to difference as liability, since it no longer requires shared characteristics with an established social group. For example, one consultant described diversity work as “any and everything that is paying attention to those differences that make a difference, and how people interact across those differences.” Thus, significant identities are not determined by socio-historical categories, but by examining what influences organizational processes. However, this does not necessarily ignore socio-historical groups. Instead, it conditions the way those groups are valued. For example, one consultant remarked:

Oh the other thing, the big business case for most firms that didn't really care about getting into this was extreme turnover, particularly of women in their, you know, they've reached their mid-thirties. And like all the professional consulting firms (who probably wouldn't have done a whole lot of changing otherwise) [...] would hire 50% women in the entry class, out of business school. And then within 10 years they would be down to 10%. [...] And so they started adding up the dollars and were alarmed. And then they figured “Wow, we really have to figure out how to keep women, to keep talent in the workplace.”

In this example, gender is significant because it affects retention; not because women provide a unique set of skills and knowledge.

While categorically different needs might influence this turnover, differences are not the source of value in the organization. According to difference as liability, the organization's repetitive failure of relationships with some employees and success with others may illustrate how taken for granted processes, including organizational norms, policies, and structures are gendered and raced to benefit traditional white male heterosexual workers (Acker, 1990), in ways that compromise rather than create value. This provides an alternative way of addressing hierarchies of human difference by locating differences in organizational processes and norms (rather than a set of predictable and shared characteristics of people or products) and challenging the normalization of processes that privilege a specific group.

These underlying distinctions in the concept of difference can be very slippery in the language of the business case. For example, human difference as liability was often described as a threat to organizational ability to leverage human capital (e.g., workers themselves). For example, one of the consultants who worked primarily with legal firms explained that "We talk a lot about how when people aren't feeling connected they're not as productive." At first glance this might look like difference as asset, which would imply difference as a positive possession of individuals. Upon reconsideration, their statement constitutes difference as liability that threatens individuals' value to the company. The person is conceptualized as an organizational asset, but the difference is not an asset, it is a liability that can compromise the asset of human capital. This difference between person-as-asset vs difference-as-asset is often ambiguous. For example, Lockheed Martin,⁴ "Diversity at Lockheed Martin is an inclusive team that values and leverages each person's individuality." While this statement clearly sustains the individual value of each person, it does not clearly value human difference as an asset that provides shared or predictable cultural knowledge (although it doesn't preclude it either). It does suggest that inclusive teams enable the organization to "value and leverage" human capital, a process that might otherwise be compromised by human difference as

4. Diversity, available at: www.lockheedmartin.com/aboutus/diversity/diversity.html

liability. Thus, this statement sits in a gray area where difference could be understood as an asset that may or may not influence a “person’s individuality.” Alternatively, difference could be understood as liability that compromises the organization’s capacity to “value and leverage” human assets. Before addressing this ambiguity and mixing of metaphors in greater depth, we address the metaphorical system of difference as possibility.

Difference as possibility

According to the metaphorical system of difference as possibility, difference is valuable precisely for its ability to destabilize accepted ways of thinking and open up new unforeseen possibilities. Unlike difference as liability, where disruptions in accepted processes are cast as problematic, difference as possibility casts ruptures that result from difference as positive because they lead to something new. This metaphor emerged in business case arguments that focused on improved products and services achieved through creative or innovative collaboration across differences. This is distinct from creating demographically specific products (which is better described as difference as asset), because it addresses the process by which diverse contributions contribute to one superior product, one that could not be predicted or anticipated.

Among the diversity consultants, difference as possibility was the least elaborated upon metaphorical system, and often merged with arguments that drew on the metaphor of liability. For example, several consultants quickly ran through a series of business case arguments, “Turnover, there’s cost associated with turnover. Productivity, it goes up. Innovation, it goes up,” or “now these employees are going to be productive, they’re going to be innovative, they’re going to come to work on time and give their best and all those things.” Websites reflected this metaphor more strongly than diversity consultants. One might attribute this to a difference in motives. While diversity consultants have the responsibility of proving their value in concrete terms in order to gain contracts, web based diversity statements often serve an aspirational function that can remain abstract, and require less concrete evidence.

Early in their statement of diversity and inclusion, Humana⁵ clearly draws on this metaphor when it contends that, “Our corporate strategy focus is on growth, innovation, and meeting the needs of consumers. Because we understand that diversity serves as a catalyst for creative thinking, we recognize that diversity is a business imperative.” The website for IBM,⁶ positions its “long history of commitment to Diversity” as a “strong foundation” enabling them to “take best advantage of our differences – for innovation”. Rather than difference as a stable asset, difference as possibility is fundamentally unstable. It is neither a property of individuals, nor a disruption to relationship between them. It is significant for the possibility of becoming something – perspectives, ideas, products or ways of being – previously unknown. In this metaphorical system, specific identity categories are rarely mentioned, seemingly unnecessary, and potentially dissolved.

The constitutive and conflictual stakes of mixing metaphors

Table I offers a neat heuristic for the three metaphorical systems of difference and the constitutive implications they hold for diversity work. However, the table belies the mixing of metaphors in everyday business case talk. Mixing metaphors gives fragmented discourse the appearance of coherence. When this seemingly coherent fragmentation is acknowledged, it can uncover conflicting interpretations and expectations of diversity work.

For example, a single diversity tactic can take on different goals and expectations depending on the metaphorical system that frames it. An example used above illustrated how ConocoPhillips (see footnote 2) used their professional communities (more commonly called affinity groups) to capture difference as an asset providing the organization access to practices, thinking, and talent that correlate with a particular identity group. This contrasts with Procter & Gamble’s (see footnote 3) approach that assumes difference as liability, and casts their

5. Diversity, available at: www.humana.com/resources/about/careers/diversity.aspx (accessed May 1, 2011).

6. Diversity 3.0, available at: www.o3.ibm.com/employment/us/diverse (accessed May 1, 2011)

affinity groups as creating an “open, welcoming, and inclusive culture,” a culture that does not compromise the “respect and advancement” of anyone. Thus, the metaphorical system that one brings to a particular diversity tactic – in this case affinity groups – can fundamentally influence the norms and expectations for participation. Moreover, Procter & Gamble’s statement goes on to claim that the groups offer financial benefit by “increasing the company’s image and reputation” with the community, stakeholders, customers and future employees. Depending on one’s metaphorical system, one could read the expectation of the group as extending and reaching specific culturally targeted groups, or as mitigating the risk that could emerge from a public relations crisis, or conflict among stakeholders, customers and future employees. Thus, unacknowledged mixing of metaphorical systems leaves a great deal at stake, including conflict over the very constitution of diversity work and its purpose.

These constitutive stakes can play out at the individual level as well. Consider the following goals shared by a diversity consultant:

And so what we’re really trying to do it is to dismantle some of the arrogance and create a little bit more of what we call a learning organization. A culture that says, I’m smarter, if I can capitalize on your experience. So it’s that synergy, that innovation that I don’t have to have all the answers.

If framed using difference as asset, “capitalize on your experience” might mean approaching an employee for identity specific knowledge, or placing particular expectations on employees of certain social identities. However, using the system of difference as possibility, capitalizing on another’s experience does not imply mining a person for a specific kind of knowledge. Instead it suggests allowing one’s own perspective to be shaped by another person in unknown ways, fostering “synergy” and “innovation” rather than knowledge boundaries. Instead of categories and identities, difference as possibility emphasizes intersectionality, where multiple perspectives are brought together to influence, change and play off one another.

While the example of the affinity groups emphasizes how metaphorical systems influence the constitution of diversity initiatives on the whole, this example demonstrates how different metaphorical

systems also constitute individual's identities. One employee approaching another from the sensemaking framework of difference as possibility (which does not necessarily construct individuals as having specific characteristics associated with group membership) is quite different from approaching another with the sensemaking framework of difference as asset and the expectation that they will provide group specific knowledge. Thus, understanding metaphorical systems offers insight into both the constitution of diversity initiatives, as well as the individual identity construction that occurs in organizational interaction. It also helps to understand conflict or failure that occurs on both of these levels due to differences of interpretation based on different metaphorical systems as sensemaking frames.

Discussion

In our analysis, we have demonstrated how the discourse of the business case is not a monolithic discourse that forwards a single and problematic concept of human difference as much of the existing literature suggests. Instead we have shown that business case arguments offer three different metaphorical systems for thinking about, acting upon, and ultimately constituting human difference in organizations. We have also pointed to the ways metaphorical systems of asset and liability parallel socio-historical discourses of difference grounded in practices of discrimination and compliance (respectively). In this discussion section, we unpack both the practical and theoretical implications for reconsidering use of the business case in light of the three metaphorical systems and their socio-historical connections.

The constrained capacity of asset, liability and possibility

While the previous section highlights the constitutive and conflictual potential of each metaphorical system, skillfully navigating these discourses requires knowledge of the constrained capacity that each metaphorical system uniquely portends for organizational diversity initiatives. For example, the marketing of cosmetics to a diverse audience illustrates how the traditionally valued asset of whiteness is challenged through a difference as asset metaphorical system. In an

organization where inequalities do exist, this metaphorical system is capable of challenging hierarchical human difference because it operates on the assumption that traditionally undervalued identities are indeed valuable. At the individual level, it frames disadvantaged individuals as having a hitherto unacknowledged valuable asset that can benefit their status in the organization. However, this reformative potential is limited. While difference as asset arguments have the potential to equalize value assigned to different identity groups, they do little to deconstruct the constraints categorization itself imposes on individuals. Difference as asset depends on the assumption that members of a group have a common set of interests or needs, which lays the foundation for the seemingly “natural” practice of assigning people of particular identity groups to particular kinds of jobs or tasks. Thus, diversity arguments based on difference as asset do not challenge the practice of categorization that serves as the foundation of discrimination. However, they can challenge the hierarchical values that dictate how categorization operates in a particular context.

When drawing on the metaphorical system of human difference as liability, categories of human difference are much more flexible and permeable because differences emerge in human interaction. As indicated by the consultant who addresses any and all “differences that make a difference,” grounding diversity initiatives in this metaphor can lead organizations to expand their list of diverse identities to include categories like organizational tenure, work styles, organizational sectors, or geographic location. Consequently, liability based arguments risk ignoring traditionally disadvantaged groups unless they are acknowledged as significant to organizational processes. Second, when it comes to public relations, liability approaches risk doing just enough superficial work to appease demand while doing little to shift organizational practice. Ultimately, difference as liability does not necessarily value the shared backgrounds that individuals bring into the workplace or acknowledge historically disadvantaged groups. However, knowing this risk, liability arguments can be leveraged in ways that acknowledge socio-historically disadvantaged groups and challenge the supposed neutrality of organizational norms, as in the example that addressed turnover rates among women.

Finally, the metaphorical system of difference as possibility shifts the possibilities and constraints for diversity initiatives. Difference as possibility offers a unique intersection of difference as asset and difference as liability. While it follows difference as an asset in acknowledging difference as valuable, it does not depend upon a shared set of knowledge. This potentially challenges the constraining effect of categories embedded in difference as asset. Like difference as liability, difference as possibility locates difference in relational interaction. However, difference as possibility's disruptive potential offers positive value in the form of creative and innovative processes, rather than avoiding difference as problematically disrupting productive organizational practices. Difference as possibility has the capacity to deconstruct traditional concepts of human difference because it does not require that human differences reflect shared skills, knowledge or values (like difference as asset); at the same time, it does not ignore the value of different life experiences (often influenced by diverse identities). Identities are deemed significant, but without the expectation that perspectives, products, and processes represent any identity group in particular. Thus we arrive at a new concept of human difference, in which differences are ubiquitous and significant to human experience, but not in wholly predictable ways. Human differences paradoxically condition human interaction, and emerge and change through relational encounters. Building diversity initiatives with this emphasis has the potential to alter understanding of categories upon which hierarchical human difference depends and move toward more intersectional understanding of difference.

However, exchanges that result in new and unpredictable becomings cannot effectively occur in organizations where some group knowledges are more valued than others. Nor can difference as possibility create these conditions because it neither addresses traditional socio-historical notions of difference, nor constitutes group membership as coherent. Moreover, this metaphorical system does not draw attention to the processes that create such inequality (a strength of arguments based on difference as liability), and offers little in the way of strategic intervention in those processes. Thus, in conditions where discrimination occurs, difference as possibility may not be useful because it assumes (and requires) mutual molding and shaping among equals. While equal standing is certainly the contemporary ideal, it is not necessarily the reality.

While most scholarly critiques focus on how the business case reinforces hierarchical categorization (Kirby and Harter, 2001; Kossek et al., 2006; Litvin, 2006; Martin, 2000; Prasad et al., 2006) our discussion highlights the constrained capacity of the three different metaphorical systems and demonstrates how each constitutes difference uniquely in both problematic and beneficial ways. Ultimately, the business case is a discursive tool that has both the limit repetition power and resistance embedded in it. This offers a clear illustration of Foucault's (1995) claim that discourse is not only fragmented and contradictory, but that it has both the seeds of power and resistance embedded in it. This has two implications for diversity work: first, scholars and practitioners must attend to the ways these metaphorical systems and their unique constitutive capacity move across socio-historical contexts, and second, practitioners should strategically select and combine these metaphorical systems in response to the particular organizational and socio-historical contexts they encounter.

Moving metaphors across context

The constrained capacity and constitutive power of metaphorical systems is particularly significant when considering how integration of these metaphors in everyday language enables concepts of difference to move across social and historical contexts. Our analysis demonstrates how metaphorical systems of asset and liability correspond with dominant notions of difference from socio-historical contexts of discrimination and compliance. Consequently, using these metaphors has the potential to reanimate the problems from a historical context in contemporary workplaces. For example, business case arguments based on difference as asset challenge the hierarchy of different knowledges yet leave categorization (the foundation of those hierarchies) in place, thus challenging hierarchical ranking while maintaining the conditions for hierarchy to reemerge. Similarly, metaphors of liability cast acknowledgment of difference as primarily negative, as is the norm with discourses of compliance fostered by legal and moral mandates that challenge discrimination. Thus, the use of liability metaphors in everyday language maintains the conceptual foundations for ignoring the value of historically impacted groups and potentially sustaining assimilationist politics. The business case sustains the

categories of difference that are essential to discrimination even as it enhances the value attributed to diverse knowledges and perspectives. It draws attention to how differences are produced through interaction that can be shifted through moral and legal calls for compliance, even as it dismisses the value that group membership brings to individual identities. For practitioners, this means that one must assess the problems of their unique organizational context and respond strategically with concepts of human difference that address those problems, rather than using blanket concepts of difference that may introduce new (yet old!) problems into an organizational context.

This becomes even more significant when considering that many organizations function at a global scale. Zanoni et al. (2010) have lamented the ways that concepts of diversity created in the US have been exported to other countries, imposing US concepts of difference on countries that may or may not share our history of problems. Given the role that metaphorical systems play in sensemaking, and the role of discourse in constituting concepts of difference, knowledge of the three metaphorical systems offers a tool for practitioners and scholars alike to specifically identify the language of diverse metaphorical systems that reconstitute US centric concepts of difference in other nations or locations, and potentially prevent the imposition of US based problems in other contexts.

Agency in mixing metaphors

This leads us to the final point of discussion addressing how scholars and practitioners might use the metaphorical systems to create and execute effective diversity initiatives that attend to both financial and social justice imperatives (Dobusch, 2017). We agree with Litvin's (2002) assessment that the business case provides "institutional thought structures" that assume certain types of problems and consequently preclude real analysis of a specific context. However, by shifting between thought structures and their unique constrained capacities, practitioners are better able to transcend the constraints of a monolithic sensemaking structure by strategically leveraging fragmentation of the business case. One way this functions is analytically, by mapping the different metaphorical systems to particular historical problems, and comparing those problems to one's own organizational

and socio-historical context. Understanding the socio-historical legacy of each metaphorical system may help practitioners identify how business case arguments contribute to organizationally specific problems, such as reinforcing rigid categories, or ignoring historically disadvantaged groups.

In addition to serving as an analytical tool, the three metaphorical systems can inform execution as well. Practitioners can integrate multiple metaphorical systems to strategically address the nuanced problems of unique organizational contexts. As we have demonstrated, each of the metaphorical systems has its own constrained capacity. Consequently, we do not posit one metaphorical system as superior to others. Instead, we suggest that practitioners themselves must skillfully assess the context where they work, and skillfully select and combine different types of business case arguments to address the problems and potential of their own context. For example, a consultant might depend on difference as possibility as a means of transforming the way difference is treated in an organization, while occasionally using difference as asset to reassert the value of voices that are undermined within a specific situation. Or, if difference as possibility is failing, a consultant may pivot to use difference as liability arguments to better understand “difference that make a difference” and interrogate organizational process. In other words, the tensions within and across the three metaphorical systems can be points of strategic leverage that balance and assuage the limitations of each case. Practitioners can reassert their own capacity to constitute difference through a continual process of construction in everyday interaction that shifts and moves across the metaphorical systems.

As a tool, knowledge of the three metaphorical systems also enhances diversity professionals’ abilities to navigate multinational contexts. For example, when operating in geopolitical contexts where caste discrimination is freely practiced, or women require legal permission from a male sponsor to work outside of the home, difference as asset arguments may be the most accessible, practical, and revolutionary strategy to create change. When there are no legal or moral mandates for compliance, the metaphor of liability will not function. Thus, business case strategies of asset may be best suited to assert value of undervalued groups and voices.

Conclusions

Ultimately, the goal of this analysis is to equip diversity professionals and scholars with a nuanced understanding of the business case and the fragmented assumptions about human difference embedded within it. Doing so also challenges scholars who critique the business case monolithically to reconsider the implications of its fragmentation. Just as Ely and Thomas's (2001) landmark analysis delineated three different perspectives – integration-and-learning, access-and-legitimacy and discrimination-and-fairness – on workplace diversity initiatives and demonstrated how these different perspective shape outcomes, our analysis digs into the underlying fragmented assumptions about human difference itself and their implications for design and outcomes. (One might even note that possibility, liability and asset, respectively, undergird the three perspectives). However, unlike Ely and Thomas, who ultimately privilege the integration-and-learning perspective, we emphasize the constrained capacity – the possibilities and limitations – of each of the three metaphorical systems we propose. Moreover, we have argued that these metaphorical systems are connected to socio-historical context in terms of legacy. As diversity initiatives move across contemporary geopolitical contexts, reformative and productive potential can be enhanced by using the three metaphorical systems as both an analytical and practical tool. Ultimately, our analysis does not advocate for the wholesale acceptance or rejection of the business case or any of the three metaphorical systems. Instead, we suggest that various kinds of arguments can be strategically deployed to address context specific problems and artfully combined to mitigate the risks embedded in each metaphorical system. In doing so, our work echoes Dobusch's (2017) claim that the financial and social change aspects of diversity work are not as distinctly opposed as many scholars suggest. Examining how these discourses are strategically played off one another through the three metaphorical systems would prove a fruitful direction for future research.

We also believe this framework can inform many existing theoretical tools and debates. For example, the contrast between business case arguments based on difference as asset and difference as liability parallel academic debates over the sameness/equality and difference frameworks for diversity work (Liff and Wajcman, 1996). Similar to

difference as liability, the sameness argument suggests that all people should be treated equally, regardless of their individual characteristics. On the other hand, the difference argument suggests that people are indeed different, and organizations should take those differences into account, just as difference as an asset should be acknowledged and leveraged for organizational use. However, scholars might examine how the metaphor of difference as possibility can contribute to the difference/similarity debate, offering a more intersectional approach (as opposed to an either/or, all-or-nothing approach) that values difference without relying on categories.

We also make a significant contribution to each of the three foci of Critical Diversity Studies highlighted by Lorbiecki and Jack (2000). Like most Critical Diversity Studies we reject an essentialist notion of identity, but we extend the theoretical framework by offering a clear distinction between concepts of human difference and identity. A focus on human difference enables scholars to critique the assumptions that span across and link different categorizations of identity, such as: race, gender, and class. Second, we echo the importance of “organizational and social context in shaping the meaning of diversity” (p. 14) while offering a historical dimension to this analysis. Finally, we complicate the relationship between power and resistance, by demonstrating how different parts of the business case simultaneously harbor the latent potential to both reinforce and challenge problematic relations of human difference. At the same time, this analysis also challenges critical diversity studies that rely too heavily on textual and artifact analysis in their discursive critiques. We suggest that relying solely on textual analysis can position diversity professionals as dupes of the discourses of the business case, and overlook the ways that diversity professionals creatively improvise and strategically deploy business case arguments. Our analysis follows both Dobusch (2017) and Tomlinson and Schwabenland (2010) who have relied on interviews with diversity practitioners to tease out the more complicated nature of the business case.

Ultimately, we have demonstrated that the business case is not merely a claim for why we should attend to human differences in organizations. We have shown that business case arguments foster specific strategies for addressing human difference, and sustain historically laden assumptions about the character of human differences. Whether

consciously or not, when we design organizational processes, programs, and expectations based on particular business case arguments and their embedded concepts of human difference, we reinsert the historically laden constrained capacity of those discourses into contemporary organizational structures. By acknowledging how current discursive practices both draw on and challenge problematic notions of human difference, scholars and practitioners can make more informed choices about the strategies and languages they use to challenge existing practices that construct human differences in organizations.

9

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