

EGPA Study Group 3: Public Personnel Policies

Research programme 2010-2012

“Managing Diversity”

After our work on ‘New Public Managers’ (1992-95), ‘Flexibility of Staffing and Personnel Systems’ (1996-98), ‘Competency management’ (1999-2000), ‘Staff Participation and Involvement in Public Management Reform (2001-2003), ‘The Future of Public Employment’ (2004-2006), and ‘Leadership, Professionalisation and HR Strategies’ (2007-2009) the Study Group is starting a new research programme on ‘Managing Diversity’ for the period 2010-2012.

Over the past decades, our societies have become increasingly diverse, and the management of diversity has become an issue for public policies as well as for organizations. Scientific management approaches based mainly on standardization have been replaced by new management theories inspired by a systemic epistemology (Von Bartalanffi, 1965) and by living systems (Miller, 1970). These new approaches hold that public (and private) organisations have to foster a diverse workforce in terms of competencies, personality traits and motivations, in order to enhance their capability to evolve and to learn.

Public organizations were among the first to emphasize the importance of employing a diverse workforce that reflects the diversity of the population and argued this by referring to public values of legitimacy and social justice. This was echoed in the literature on ‘representative bureaucracy’ (Kingsley 1944; Long, 1952; Meier, 1975; Meier & Nigro, 1976) whose central claim was that bureaucracy should represent the society it serves. Private organizations have also begun to support the importance of a diverse workforce, but for other reasons such as attracting talented employees, servicing diverse segments of clients and improving organizational performance (Bogaert & Vloeberghs 2005; Mavis & Girling 2000). This type of reasoning now seems to be taken up by public organizations as well.

Diversity of workforce and population is not the only origin of calls for attention to managing diversity. The diversity of organizational settings is another one. For instance, some segments of the public sector such as healthcare are confronted more acutely with a tight labour market than other segments and consequently have called for more room to design personnel policies to the needs of the (scarce) employees to be attracted. Professional service organizations prefer other personnel policies in areas such as development and pay than organizations providing mass services or public organizations that face increasing competition from private organizations.

Despite the growing consensus about the importance of having a diverse workforce, research evidence is scarce and there are many questions that call for researcher interest. What is diversity actually, what kinds of diversity [of workforce and of organizations] are important, what does managing a diverse workforce entail, to what extent will public personnel policies that used to be characterized as standardized and collective (Farnham & Horton 1996) shift to arrangements that are flexible in order to accommodate diversity of employment needs, and under what conditions does a diverse workforce contribute to performance?

The concept of diversity employed above refers firstly to diversity of employees. Some definitions of diversity concentrate on visible differences of employees, that is, differences in personal characteristics such as gender, age and race, while others use a broader definition that also includes invisible differences such as differences in knowledge and competencies, values, interests and motivations, career anchors and lifestyle (Harrison, Price & Bell 1998, Schein, 1995). Defining diversity in terms of visible characteristics should be done carefully. One should examine (for the research question under consideration) whether differences between groups defined by personal characteristics are greater than within-category differences. For instance, there are significant differences in workability and employability *between* older workers in the 50+ age group, and treating older workers as one category is not always wise (Ilmarinen 2002).

Another relevant basis of diversity concerns occupational/ professional groups which often differ in terms of motives that may necessitate differences in HRM practices. Professional autonomy at work and opportunities for professional development are thus important areas in personnel policy for medical specialists in hospitals and judges in law courts, but the administrative support staff members in these organizations probably have different needs. Still, *female* medical specialists, judges and staff members may share special needs based on their gender. Another issue relating to gender is that females respond differently from men to the traditional management tools such as economic incentives (Villeva, Gupta & Poulsen 2005; Gneezy, Niederle & Rustichini, 2003). On the whole, it is important to theorize about what kind of diversity is relevant for a given research question and why, and it is also important to allow different conceptualizations of employee diversity.

Employee diversity is not, however, the only relevant understanding of diversity. Organizations can also be diverse. This diversity can for example relate to values and organisational cultures (Schein, 1992). Antonsen and Beck Jorgensen (1997) have shown that differences between public organizations as regards their publicness have serious implications for management's discretion to manage for instance in such domains as human resource management. Organizations may place different values on groups of employees and instigate different HR-policies (Lepak & Snell, 2002), which unions are prone to criticize because these differences in HR-policies are believed to undermine solidarity.

So-called "contingent HRM practices", inspired by contextualism, have become popular through the work done by Pichault and Nizet (2000, 2006). These approaches suggest that HRM policies and processes should take into account the specificity of the context and the diversity of the workforce in order to be more effective. 'Managing diversity' may thus imply that different types of personnel policies should be used for employees with different personal characteristics, different occupations, or different values, working in different organizational settings. Operating different systems of HRM within a single organization may have benefits for the organization (performance) and for the employees (e.g. better fit between HR practices and employee needs, employee satisfaction and well-being). In particular, approaches based on segmentation of employees, inspired by marketing theories, may be very useful to customize HRM practices in order to give tailor-made answers to specific motivations and career profiles. But abandoning a universalistic approach to workforce management will probably also cause problems. Specifically, perceived violation of fairness and justice, or – more generally - of the psychological contract, could have negative consequences for motivation and commitment (Clinton & Edwards 2009; Rousseau 2005). This can be especially true in a public context where standardization and a collective orientation have traditionally been important.

Mapping the terrain of diversity shows that there are many topics related to the central theme of 'managing diversity'. There are descriptive and explanatory questions to be examined, and the debate also involves many normative issues, one of the central dilemmas being between equality and individualization in terms of fitting HRM practices exactly to different parts of a diverse workforce. We therefore expect this central theme to have a rich potential as a research theme for Study Group 3 for the 2010 – 2012 period, and it furthermore touches on the research done by study group members in several countries. In order to focus the research, four topics and related questions are suggested.

Manifestations of diversity (of the workforce, but also of public sector organizations)

What concepts and aspects of diversity are important in public organizations? What is the broader diversity discourse in the public domain? Why (or why not?) is diversity regarded as an issue? In what ways is the diversity discourse in public organizations different from private organizations? Are there concerns about the impact of diversity on merit in personnel policies, and how are these concerns dealt with? What public values play a role in the diversity debate? Does diversity of employees suggest that there is also diversity in (public service) motivation between employee groups? Is support for publicness a shared value of civil servants irrespective of their diversity? What public organizations operate different systems of HRM within a single workforce, and how can this be accounted for in view of the characteristics of traditional public personnel policies?

Addressing diversity in personnel policies

Is diversity seen as an issue that must be addressed by management and personnel policies? What kinds of personnel policies are effective in addressing the inequality consequences of diversity for specific categories of employees? What is the good mix between standardized and customized HRM approaches? How do organizations that customize personnel policies relate to trade unions that are critical of or resist such policies? Do public managers have the competences and motivation to manage a diverse workforce? Do public managers have the discretionary space and support from HR staff to differentiate human resource practices? Do Management Development programmes teach managers to manage a diverse workforce effectively? And how is diversity taken into account in the staffing and training processes of public managers, in order to avoid a standardized management and leadership style? Can the HR function cater for growing differences in employee groups? What are the experiences with a transition from isolated diversity projects to embedding diversity in all people management activities? How do organizations create support for the change process that managing diversity implies?

Consequences of HRM diversity

Is HRM diversity possible and acceptable in public organizations that have a history of collective, standardized and/or employee welfare- and equity-oriented personnel policies? What is the impact of the simultaneous use of different employment practices on employees (that is, HRM diversity)? What is its effect on the psychological contract for various groups of employees? What does it mean for the style of management within public organizations? Under what conditions does HRM diversity 'work'? Are there in some circumstances negative consequences of diversity? Is HRM diversity at odds with the very idea of public service?

Outcomes of management of diversity

Does management of diversity result in a workforce that is a reflection of the population, and does that lead to a higher legitimacy of public policy and/or to a public service that is better able to serve diverse clients? Is diversity a double-edged sword in public organizations, resulting in better organizational performance as well as more conflicts? Does management of diversity result in more innovation and better performance? Under what conditions does diversity lead to negative team or organizational performance? Does HRM diversity result in a better fit with employee needs and consequent employee outcomes (job satisfaction, well-being)?

Organization of the research programme

The first EGPA Conference in which the new research programme will be central to Study Group 3 workshops is the Toulouse conference, September 8-10, 2010. The Study Group 3 convenors suggest to start with a broad survey of the topics addressed by the research programme; later conferences will focus on more specific issues.

Abstracts of proposed papers, no more than two sides of A4 in length, should be sent by email to all Study Group Convenors and the EGPA Secretariat by 1 May 2010. Papers that are accepted should be sent by email to the Convenors and EGPA by 31 July 2010.

The aims of the Study Group convenors are to obtain refereed journal publications each year around the sub-themes and the conference papers and to produce a monograph/book at the end of the third year.

Convenors

Dr Lotte Bogh Andersen	Lotte@ps.au.dk
Professor Peter Leisink	P.L.M.Leisink@uu.nl
Dr Wouter Vandenabeele	wouter.vandenabeele@soc.kuleuven.be

EGPA Secretary: Dr Fabienne Maron f.maron@iias-iisa.org

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