

What is Diversity?

And how do we study and write about it?

Cultural and religious diversity is a common characteristic of many European societies and cities. On the one hand, 'diversity' can refer to the quality or state of having many different forms, types and ideas, and is thus conceived of as a desirable source of potential, often associated with inspiring creativity and driving innovation. On the other hand, diversity is often understood as identity- and value-based diversity, and associated with a range of societal problems, including a perceived threat to social cohesion. In this policy brief, we explore how to study and write about diversity in ways that do not reproduce essentializing ideas about which aspects of difference matter and which do not.

Brief Points

- 'Diversity' refers to differences in identity markers, values, knowledge and behaviours.
- Differences in social categories, perspectives and practices are not static identity markers; rather, they are complex, interrelated, and dynamic.
- Notions about what types of difference matter are historically and geographically situated and are embedded in societal power structures.
- Research designs, including how research questions are formulated and how research participants are defined and selected, risk essentializing particular forms of diversity.

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Introduction

What is diversity and how do we research and write about it as academics, or indeed as policy makers or practitioners? In this policy brief, we explore the concept of diversity, and ask how we can study and write about diversity in ways that do not essentialize particular dimensions of difference. This matters, because by reifying some boundaries of difference, select power structures and forms of inequality become visible, whilst others remain invisible.

The concept of 'diversity' is defined as 'the condition of having or being composed of differing elements or qualities'. It is understood as variety, 'especially the inclusion of different types of people (such as people of different races or cultures) in a group or organization'.

When studying diversity, we may ask what statistics we collect, and about which groups? How are research questions formulated, and in what ways are research participants identified? Do some of the choices we make in designing our research predetermine the results we may find, and are there alternative choices we can make?

Approaches to Diversity

Diversity has been studied in a range of fields, including organization studies and migration studies, while also having grown into a field of its own. 'Diversity studies' explores how diversity affects social relationships within groups, organizations and societies. Diversity here relates to how people self-identify and to how, where and when they are seen to belong – to which community or communities.

Critical diversity studies goes a step further by looking into how particular identity markers such as class, gender, age, ethnicity, race and religion are socially constructed: how these are ideas that have been created and accepted by society at a particular place and time. Rather than understanding identity markers as fixed, objective categories that impact people's perspectives and practices in predetermined ways, critical diversity studies aims to understand how individual acts and beliefs are embedded in organizational and societal contexts and structures.

While in migration studies, diversity is often assumed to relate to racial or religious difference in present-day Europe, in business studies, diversity is often studied with a broader

perspective. Besides a focus on identity-based and value-based diversity, these studies also explore cognitive- and behaviour-based forms of diversity: what do we know, and how do we act?

Problem- or Potential-Oriented Approaches

Diversity in the more narrow, identity-based sense is often assumed to be connected to a range of societal problems, including posing a threat to social cohesion. Diversity in the broader, organizational sense, on the other hand, is often presented as desirable. A common finding of research on diversity in organizations and businesses is that diverse groups have access to a larger pool of resources, including ideas, opinions, perspectives and values, that can allow them to come up with innovative ideas and more creative solutions. Whether this potential can be reached is seen to depend on the quality of diversity management. In other words, a diversity dividend can be realized when diversity is well managed.

Critical diversity studies questions both these approaches on a number of grounds. First, diversity in both the problem- and potential-oriented approaches is understood as based on fixed, objective entities. In reality, these individual characteristics – whether identity-, value-, cognitive- or behaviour-based – are not static. Second, critical perspectives highlight that organizational and societal contexts are insufficiently taken into account, despite the fact that they are crucial for analyzing how diversity is understood and experienced. And third, critical diversity studies argues for the need to analyze how individual acts are embedded historically and geographically in structurally determined inequalities, including unequal access to resources.

This policy brief explores some of the dilemmas one faces when studying or working with organizational and societal diversity. We draw on research and writing for the project 'Active Citizenship in Culturally and Religiously Diverse Societies' (ACT), as well as practical experiences with a range of initiatives to improve diversity in academia, including coaching and mentoring, hiring processes, academic events and participation in the public debate.

By highlighting several real dilemmas, we aim to create greater awareness of the complexities of studying and working with diversity. We believe these dilemmas are relevant for researchers, but also for those whose job it is to improve

the inclusion of different types of people in organizations, address societal challenges that occur because of increased diversity, or reduce structural inequalities that affect different social groups differently.

Dilemmas

Diversity refers to the reality created by individuals and groups having a wide range of identity markers, values, knowledge and behaviours. Furthermore, the fact that others may see an individual or group in ways that foreground particular aspects of class, gender or race can impact their experiences, for example through their access to resources and opportunities.

In working with diversity, a core dilemma relates to the fact that, on the one hand, researchers may wish to make visible such classed, gendered, racialized everyday realities or lived, real experiences of people. On the other hand, their efforts may reproduce these very realities by reducing the complex identities of individuals to one or a limited number of traits.

To give a concrete example of this, researchers may want to study the education or employment experiences of visible minorities in Norway. When they do, they will classify people in particular ways, such as separating those with or without immigrant background. This approach, however, risks reproducing the duality of the immigrant versus the national – irrespective of whether the individual with immigrant background may hold nationality or is even born in Norway. This may mask or deny dynamic, complex realities.

When we categorize people in one way rather than another, this implies a range of underlying assumptions as to what factors may influence individual and collective experiences. In the above example, one underlying assumption may be that being brought up outside Norway in a country with different educational or employment realities affects education and employment outcomes in Norway, or that the experience of migration and relocation has an impact. Another assumption may be that cultural norms and values, taught to children by their parents, influences educational and employment experiences. A third one could be that individuals with visible minority backgrounds face discrimination in schools and the labour market. At times, these underlying assumptions are made explicit in the research design, but often they are not.

- **Intersectionality** is a term coined in the late 1980s by Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw to study how various forms of social stratification, such as gender, class, race, and age, intersect to impact power inequalities in society. Intersectional theorizing has been criticized for offering little practical means as to how an intersectional approach would take shape in practice, as much of the work either stays theoretical or empirically studies a certain combination of individual traits, such as gender and race.
- In the early 1990s, authors like Homi K. Bhabha, Stuart Hall, Gayatri Spivak and Paul Gilroy developed theories around the concept of **hybridity** (mixture), studying its effects on identity and culture. While in theory, the concept of hybridity aims to eliminate essentialized thinking and practice, in reality it is prone to the same essentialist framework through the creation of a 'sub-altern' as one figure, devoid of contextual difference.
- In the early 2000s, Andreas Wimmer and Nina Glick Schiller developed a critique to the **methodological nationalism** of the social sciences, arguing that the assumed natural social and political form of the nation-state determined the analytical lens through which social phenomena are studied. Earlier work by Glick Schiller and colleagues in the 1990s had illustrated the importance of **transnational approaches**, which study the impact of the movement of ideas, people and capital across borders.
- **Superdiversity**, a term coined in 2005 by Steven Vertovec, refers to increased population diversity through a higher number of new, small-scale, transnationally connected, socioeconomically differentiated groups of migrants. Superdiversity has come about through shifts in migration patterns, migrant capital and legal regimes. Later work developed these ideas through concepts such as commonplace diversity, migration-related diversity and **cultural complexity** (the latter concept by Thomas Hylland Eriksen). Both transnationalism approaches and those focusing on superdiversity have been criticized for paying insufficient attention to structural inequalities and power relations.

Categorizing means that different groups of people, with different characteristics and experiences, are lumped together based on one assumption or another. And yet, individual characteristics such as ethnicity, religion or gender may matter in some instances, but not in others, or for some people, but not for others. One obvious challenge is that we do not have the language to describe groups of people for whom identity markers at times matter and at times do not – or matter for some individuals within a group, but not for others.

For example, distinguishing between majority and minority, or between 'ethnic Norwegians' and those who are not, presumes that Norwegian-ness is distinguished by ethnicity rather than by birth, passport, residence or any other aspects that may make a difference in the everyday lives of individuals. Using these terms can have exclusionary implications in a plural society, even if one's aim may be to expose practices of marginalization.

Alternatives would be to just refer to 'Norwegians' or 'residents of Norway'. This may not be appropriate either, for several reasons. First, the experiences of different groups of residents are not the same, as certain groups face marginalization and may not have the same rights or sense of identity and belonging in practice. In Norway, those who are identified as having a minority background, including for example Norwegian-Somali or Sami individuals, may not fully identify as 'Norwegian' or may feel others do not see them to be Norwegian. Furthermore, upholding boundaries that essentialize difference between groups can be a matter of importance, historical obligation or life and death when considering e.g. the rights of religious minorities in Pakistan or Myanmar. On the other hand, discrimination and racism based on static, essentialized ethnic or religious boundaries have led to the worst atrocities in human history.

Exploring Alternative Approaches

The dilemmas related to how we can approach groups and categories as plural and dynamic, but simultaneously as real and experienced, are considerable. The research design, such as who is included in the study as a member of which category, matters. The way we categorize the world through language has consequences for how we observe it; at the same time, our experiences impact the way we choose and give

meaning to such words and categories. In these processes, power relations play an important part. The role of researchers in knowledge production comes with a responsibility to reflect carefully on categorizations and their impacts.

Alternative approaches to studying and writing about diversity (see textbox) have aimed to balance the socially constructed with the real-life nature of identity markers; the pluralistic, fluid experiences of individuals and communities with the structural inequalities that are determined by highly particular forms of difference that are classed, gendered or racialized.

'Diversity' within the ACT Project

The ACT project studied active citizenship in culturally and religiously diverse societies, asking how increased diversity affects the ways in which residents of Oslo, Norway and Copenhagen, Denmark engage in society. The project studied active civic participation from the entry point of how people act 'civically'. Rather than focusing on how nationality and ethnicity determine people's engagements, the research design instead focused on how multiple identity markers are at play and interact when people engage (or not) as active citizens. This was done by selecting residents in a few differently positioned neighborhoods in the two cities. The chosen methodologies included life histories and other in-depth interviews, studying the range of factors influencing individual actions and perspectives.

Furthermore, the research approach included a focus on transnational, national and local experiences of active citizenship, and on how these levels mutually interact. In increasingly diverse societies, the global and transnational may gain relevance for how citizens understand and practice their civic responsibilities both nationally and locally. How do individuals relate to these different levels of scale in their initiatives to participate in society? How do the civic engagements on these different levels compare between citizens with different class, gender, age, and cultural and religious backgrounds?

While drawing on a range of alternative approaches to studying diversity, the research design differed from many common approaches to civic engagement, which often either study migrants or focus on national populations at large. One challenge faced by studies that aim

to empirically explore what differences matter, and when, relates to the boundaries of fields of study. Studies on integration commonly foreground ethnic identity, whereas mainstream gender studies often foreground gender as a main factor of interest. An approach that includes a more holistic empirical approach to identity-, value-, cognitive- and behaviour-based differences – by starting from residence in different areas within a city and societal engagement at various levels – is more unusual.

One of the interesting outcomes of this approach is that it has allowed us to see parallels in the data that we would otherwise not have found. For example, there are several groups of people who feel that their civic contributions are not recognized by the wider society. Sigrid Hansen is a pensioner from west Oslo who is interviewed by Sundus Osman for the project. Sigrid describes the many ways in which pensioners contribute and then laments the fact that this group is invisible in Norwegian society:

If someone would interview me today they would probably interview me about how it is to be old, and you would probably be interviewed about how it is to be Muslim in Norway. If you are handicapped, it is not interesting whether you have important opinions about the society, what is interesting is that you are handicapped, that's what you will be interviewed about. And that is how society has become! And that is of course completely wrong, because of course one does have opinions even if one is old.

Across gender, age, ethnicity and a range of other identity markers, we find residents in Oslo and Copenhagen who actively engage in their local, national or transnational environment and share the feeling of not being heard or seen. This finding allows us to ask new and

interesting questions about forms of exclusion and inclusion, ideas about resources and burdens, and a range of issues that relate to active citizenship today. The research design, with its deliberate focus on 'residents' – instead of 'migrants' versus 'non-migrants' – thus provides a broader lens through which to view civic engagement.

Beyond Research: Diversity in Practice

While our focus here has mainly been on research, we argue that the question of what diversity is and how to study and write (as well as speak) about it, is relevant also for those who work with diversity issues in practice.

Drawing on our experience with practices to increase diversity in academia, and debate on the matter, we see several interesting parallels. First, these practices also to a large extent focus on identity-based forms of difference, and largely on gender and ethnicity. What would happen if the focus were to shift to a greater attention to value-based diversity, or to cognitive diversity, which seems particularly relevant in the context of academic knowledge creation? What would the debates focus on, and what practices could be envisioned to make space for these types of difference? What would be required from management to be able to benefit from such diversity?

A clear parallel can be seen between the dilemmas faced by organizations working with diversity issues and in research: namely, that in trying to work against structural inequalities, one risks separating individuals – such as women and ethnic minorities – from the larger group and identifying them as in need of support. This comes with all kinds of disadvantages. At the same time, not taking such targeted measures risks not addressing the structural inequalities and disadvantages faced.

While special programmes for women or ethnic minorities – for example, to offer mentoring – are shown to have a positive impact on career paths, the targeted groups and others may respond very negatively to such measures. Simultaneously, if mentoring is not currently available to these groups to the same extent as to other groups, thus contributing to their academic careers lagging behind, not offering targeted measures in reality means that these groups on average will not have access to mentoring and other career-advancing interactions to the same extent as their peers.

Conclusion

The way we categorize the world matters and is influenced by personal and collective histories. If we ask critical questions about what our specific lens enables us to see and what it obstructs or obscures, and with what consequent impact, we can imagine what might happen if we begin to ask different research questions, to identify different challenges and opportunities, and thus to adopt a different angle or approach.

Asking critical questions about how we study and write about diversity can be done in a constructive way that simply moves beyond understanding diversity as being about particular differences over others, such as when focusing on specific identity markers like ethnicity or gender. Studying diversity not just in terms of identity-based differences, but also exploring value-, cognitive- or behavioural-based differences and their impacts holistically may enable us to envision plural societies and their opportunities and challenges in new and interesting ways. ■

Note

Names of our research participants have been replaced with pseudonyms.

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THE PROJECT

The project 'Active Citizenship in Culturally and Religiously Diverse Societies' (ACT) studies citizenship norms and practices in Oslo and Copenhagen. ACT is a collaboration between researchers at PRIO, the Aarhus University and the Arctic University of Norway. The project is funded by the Research Council of Norway.

PRIO

The Peace Research Institute Oslo (PRIO) is a non-profit peace research institute (established in 1959) whose overarching purpose is to conduct research on the conditions for peaceful relations between states, groups and people. The institute is independent, international and interdisciplinary, and explores issues related to all facets of peace and conflict.