

## **Abstract**

**Purpose:** The purpose of this paper is to report on the 2008 inaugural Equal Opportunities Conference held at the University of East Anglia, Norwich, UK.

**Design/methodology/approach:** The report is based on delegate observations, notes and audience reactions to some of the papers presented on research conducted across Europe, Asia and North America.

**Findings:** The papers represented new boundaries in diversity research. This included research on women's experiences in traditional male domains of Science Engineering and Technology, developments in investigating diversity such as intersectional analysis, resource dependency theory and social movement theory, and insights on the experiences of specific minority ethnic groups, challenging some of the assumptions of within-group homogeneity in diversity research.

**Originality/value:** This report integrates a number of themes from diversity research across the world, highlighting some of the progress accomplished so far as well as the suggested direction for future diversity research.

The inaugural Equal Opportunities Conference was held between 1<sup>st</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> July, at the University of East Anglia, Norwich, UK. The aim of the conference was to provide an international platform for the exchange of knowledge across all strands of equality, diversity and inclusion at work. About 80 delegates from across the world attended and research was presented across five Streams. In addition, there were keynote speeches, a doctoral colloquium, a practitioner session, and two professional development sessions.

The conference started with an evening drinks reception in the highly acclaimed Sainsbury's Centre for Visual Arts during which Professor Mustafa Ozbilgin (Professor of Human Resource Management at the Norwich Business School and the co-director of [DECERe](#), (Diversity and Equality in Careers and Employment Research), took the opportunity to network and make brief introductions before the formal dinner and evening speech. The following morning, the conference opened with a welcome by Professor Ozbilgin providing delegates with a brief background regarding the journey which led to the conference and the vision to provide an annual platform for international scholars and practitioners to share current knowledge and work on workplace diversity.

The first key note address, by Geraldine Healy, set the scene for the conference by challenging diversity scholars to investigate diversity using an intersectional analytical framework. Illustrating the work that still needs to be done to achieve equality in organisations, Healy proposes that drawing on multiple levels of difference including gender, ethnicity, class and sexual orientation would significantly advance our understanding of inequalities in organisations.

Research presented in the 'Work and Career experiences of Ethnic Minority Men and Women' stream continued the theme of pushing the boundaries of diversity research and increasing the level of sophistication with which we address diversity-related organisational research. The work presented highlighted the richness of knowledge that can be gained from international research, and the critical importance of local context in making sense of diversity-related issues. For instance, Fu's work on global diversity management focused on the interactions between expatriate and Chinese employees in two Western multinational company subsidiaries in China. Drawing on Jackson & Schuler's typology of cultural diversity (2003), Fu identified the mediating thoughts and processes through which the effects of cultural diversity are translated into observable behaviours, including emotional and cognitive reactions to diversity training and cross cultural interactions. Contrary to much organisational and practitioner rhetoric, the study indicated that cultural diversity management did not necessarily lie at the forefront of international human resource management as neither organisation sought to systematically map cultural differences or refine its practices to more appropriately suit the particular needs of its Chinese subsidiaries. Fu recommends more sophisticated approaches to cross cultural training such as going beyond presenting information on host country norms to exploring underlying reasons behind styles of communication and working. Turning to Europe, Ortleib & Sieben's unit of analysis was the organisation. Integrating literature on organisational strategy, diversity and resource dependency theory, they sought to provide a single, systematic answer to why persons with migration backgrounds are (not) employed. Their resultant typology of diversity strategies offers a unitary lens for explaining the various attitudes held by organisations towards employing diverse individuals. Testing their hypotheses with 500 heads of personnel of German organisations, they found initial support for the hypothesis that choice of diversity strategy is dependent on organisational intent to accrue critical resources and reduce dependencies from resource providers, thus providing an explicit business case for various diversity models in which employees with migration backgrounds are conceived as an organisational resource. In another part of Europe, Lenaers' study on non-EU citizens in Belgium examined the labour market outcomes of non-native graduates. This study is distinctive in comparison to much Belgian labour market research in its focus on relatively successful people of minority origin. The results of this postal survey of a matched group of 457 graduates indicated that non-natives (graduates with surnames of Italian, Turkish or Moroccan origin) remained unemployed for a longer period of time after graduation than native Belgians. Once employed, the author found no significant differences between natives and non-natives in income and nature of employment contract. Significant differences were however found in the perceptions held by the non native group of the need to 'try harder' to achieve success compared to their native peers. This theme of expending more effort recurred in some of the UK-based studies.

The UK studies broke away from the implicit assumption of much diversity research regarding the homogeneity of the minority ethnic experience in the workplace. Tang added some richness to the numbers that indicate higher levels of qualification for minority ethnic women (of those in employment, a higher proportion of Bangladeshi, Pakistani and Black Caribbean women than white women are graduates, EOC, 2007) by exploring the experiences of some of these women. Tang adopted novel techniques such as observing art workshops, to describe the aspirations and expectations of minority ethnic women and barriers they face in finding jobs that match their qualifications, skills and potential.

Three UK studies shed light on under-investigated differences within the 'black' ethnic group. Kenny & Briner reported on the experiences of young minority ethnic graduates, focusing on the intersectionality of race and class. The semi structured interviews of black British Caribbean graduate employees investigated experiences around ethnic identity at work (including racial discrimination), social class and career progression. They found that two key triggers increased ethnic identity salience in the workplace - ethnic identification (self identification with an ethnic group) and ethnic assignation (feelings of being classified by others as a member of an ethnic group). The authors described how ethnic assignation served to propel participants to perform, and many possessed the self-belief that they could surmount the obstacles posed by discrimination and stereotypes, and advance their careers. However, most believed there was a ceiling to this, evidenced by the notable absence of senior role models in their organisations. Atewologun explored the ways by which young African and Caribbean professionals constructed and negotiated their intersecting gender and ethnic identities in the workplace. The focus group discussions revealed the crucial role that local context plays in shaping ethnic minorities' identities. For instance, in line with social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979), participants' identities were constructed by juxtapositioning one minority ethnic group against another, including drawing on stereotypes held of other black groups in the UK. Participants also identified tensions in enacting their 'assigned' identities, consciously adopting a number of strategies to survive in the workplace. There was some emerging evidence that groups constructed identities in subtly different ways, with the notion of class being more salient for the black British Caribbean graduates and culture apparently a more salient bases to explain the workplace experiences of the young African professionals. However both studies (Kenny & Briner, and Atewologun) indicate how, rather than merely being acted upon in the environment, young minority ethnic professionals actively employ agency to reconstruct and sustain their identities as minority ethnic individuals in the workplace. Continuing this theme, Lewis' work on British black accountants illustrated how ethnic minority professionals acknowledge that racial inequalities are likely to play a role in determining their future career path. The implications of being perceived as a 'professional lite' (adopting a term used by Kenny & Briner) impacts on the credibility and status accorded minority ethnic professionals. Within the context of the accountancy profession, this became manifest in the fragility of the trust between client and accountant as participants

considered how extra effort needed to be expended for trust to be earned yet experienced regular reminders that this trust could easily be revoked.

In a separate stream, the practitioners' track focused on topics related to gender, ethnicity, and enterprise development, primarily in the UK. Presenters discussed such issues as the extent to which government initiatives surrounding equal opportunities were filtered down and practiced at the level of small to medium business, the relationship between female entrepreneurship and innovation, and barriers facing BME entrepreneurs in accessing business support services.

Research presented in the Gender Equality in Medicine; Issues of professionalism and exclusion, Gender equality and career progression within Science, Engineering and Technology professions stream highlighted some frustrations with XXX and the complexity of issues indicating that there is still much more to be done to ensure that women's pay, and career progression is equal to their counterparts in these historically 'masculine' professions. Dhar-Bhattacharjee's work on the gender gap in the UK's engineering industry highlighted some of the issues underlying this. Dhar-Bhattacharjee suggests that the reasons behind the gap are complex and interconnected, ranging from blatant discrimination on the employer's part, to the challenges of measurement (e.g. including benefits such as a company car), and the fact that women may receive lower pay and benefit packages because they are more likely to be working reduced hours. However, Dhar-Bhattacharjee's work did conclude on a positive note, with participants employed in the public sector being more satisfied as they perceive their grading systems as transparent. Moving into the world of science, Connolly presented two papers that explored interconnecting issues. The first paper provided insight into the first attempt to quantify the disadvantages faced by women in academic science. The data highlighted that amongst academic scientists there is a gender pay differential of £7,800. Most of this can be accounted for by age, seniority, discipline, productivity, esteem, domestic and workplace responsibilities, but a significant proportion remains unexplained (19% in university and 30% in research institutes). The second paper illustrated that even though women account for a growing proportion of the labour market they still remain under-represented in top jobs across Europe and the US. Connolly's findings clearly indicate the continued existence of a glass ceiling at different stages of the career development cycle such as the point of promotion to the next grade. Yirmibesoglu's paper explored the reasons behind the high number of women physicians, compared to the small number that were employed as surgeons. This author believes there is a need investigate individual barriers to entry and change current organisational way of thinking and working. Staying with the medical profession, Dr Maria Tsouroufli kept the audience alert with her paper on the discourses of learning and gendered work. Dr Maria Tsouroufli's work illustrated how the masculine paradigm of medical apprenticeship and medical culture reifies the emergence and performance of

localised femininities and masculinities within which professional identities are developed.

Research presented in the stream 'Unsettling inequalities in the public sector' showcased Barry, Berg and Chandler's work examining the gendered politics of social policy and social work in the Indian city of Mumbai. Their paper attempted to show that social policy and social work are indeed open to debate, contestation and (re)negotiation over time. In addition to this they explored the impact of the quota system and how that in itself provides a ripple effect in the way women are represented and perhaps seen as a threat to their male counterparts. Moving to a different part of the globe Inal, Ozbilgin and Karatas-Ozkan's paper analysed Turkish Cypriot female solicitors' career experiences in the UK, using a case study approach. The study adopted a critical realist perspective, taking into consideration the macro-contextual and micro-agentic aspects of Turkish Cypriot women's career development. The findings revealed that macro, meso and micro effects are responsible for the polarisation of opportunities in ethnic enclaves. Another paper of note examined gender equality in career development within the world of banking. Maxwell explored the concept of mentoring as a tool for enhancing the careers of female employees of a high street bank.

Research presented in the Multiple Discrimination and Mapping Diversity stream sought to capture an international understanding and meaning of diversity. Morley's work on gender equality in higher education suggests that participation rates for women in higher education have increased between 1999 and 2005 in all regions of the world, which suggests that there are now more undergraduate women than men in higher education. Morley indicates that behind the figures there is a more complex and concerning story. There appears to be a range of questions that still need answers in both quantitative and qualitative terms. Morley concludes by stating 'that women's exclusion from higher education is an historical injustice...women are participating, in increasing numbers....yet, women's academic identities are often forged in otherness, as strangers in opposition to men's belonging and entitlement'. Within the same stream other papers were submitted which explored the concept of group coaching within global financial services for new mothers, stories of discrimination and work life decision-making during maternity leave and the use of social movement theory as a strategy for change.

The conference also featured a doctoral colloquium, chaired by Dr Jose Pascal da Rocha. There were five papers presented within this stream which provided some interesting and exciting debates. The paper that sparked off the initial debate was presented by Showunmi, entitled 'The 'Real' Deal: Voices of unemployed black women. A member of the audience challenged whether there was a need to identify with the term blackness....' The following paper presented by Atewologun continued the debate as Atewologun explored multiple identities

in black and minority ethnic professionals. Akcakoca's work examined the world of banking in Turkey and the intersections of gender and religion, which made way for Losert's paper on the diversity experience through the eyes of employees, workers' councils and management. The final paper was given by Wright whose research topic focused on the intersection of gender, sexuality and class in non-traditionally female work.

The second keynote speaker Professor Myrtle Bell captured the debates and the themes present for much of the conference cobining a personal and academic perspective to diversity research. Bell explored the meaning of equality, diversity, and inclusion at work, posing questions regarding where we have been and where we are going with diversity from a primarily North American perspective. She shared experiences from her own journey, taking the audience through some of the tribulations that shaped the woman she has become. Passionately, she made the point through various case studies that while some things have changed, there is still much more to be done with regards to embracing all kinds of difference in organisations and societies, including differences related to religion and physical appearance.

Overall the work presented at the conference indicated the diverse ways in which diversity is defined and investigated as well as the important role of national context in determining the differences that are relevant and meaningful for workers. It also highlighted the potential that increased sophistication with the way we do diversity research has for impacting positively and in a meaningful way on many facets of organisational life

#### References

Jackson, S . E., and Schuler, R . S. (2003), *Managing human resources through strategic partnerships*. (Cincinnati, Ohio: South-Western) .

Tajfel, Henri; Turner, John (1979). "An Integrative Theory of Intergroup Conflict", in Austin, William G.; Worchel, Stephen: [\*The Social Psychology of Intergroup Relations\*](#). Monterey, CA: Brooks-Cole, 94-109.