

A Conceptual Exploration of Diversity and Organizational Politics

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Abstract

Diversity, diversity management and organizational politics are concepts that have intrigued academicians and practitioners for decades. Yet, serious scholarship on politics in organizations only emerged as a viable body of scientific inquiry just within the past twenty years. Overtime, despite the arrays of literatures to their credit, not much has been done with regard to the relationship they might share. Whereas, it is useful to delve into investigating this pressing interest, since there is very little indigenous literature available to create a balance between the variables. The study seeks to address this void by exploring diversity related issues and how they influence one another, organizational politics inclusive. The study was carried out through critical review of existing paltry literature and personal interview with managers in some organizations. The methodology is therefore, exploratory and narrative. The social identity theory; embedded intergroup theory; organization demography theory and the research on racioethnicity theory are commonplace postulates, which address the issues of diversity and politics in the organization. Findings showed that competition for resources and power, are major causes of politics in the organization. Organizational politics is a relative consequence of peoples' behaviour shaped by diversity. Organizational politics is seen as having positive influence in an organization when it is linked to the achievement of success and goals in some ways. The challenge for managers and organizations, therefore, is to create a condition in which employees have the opportunity to individually describe themselves. Tapping fully the human resource potential of every member of the workforce should be the goal of any organization. There is no doubt as to if diversity breeds conflict, yes it can, but also can be managed to yield positive results.

Keywords: organizational politics, diversity management, diversity initiative, political behaviour.

1. Introduction

With contemporary societies shifting to more advanced forms of technology, their social structures have become more complex. This has affected the struggle for scarce resources as individuals are seeking for their diverse interest to be heard and addressed. Though organizations vary in their sizes, specificity of goals, degree of efficiency, they are all structured to facilitate the management of diversity related issues. Their diversity at all levels tends to create room for organizational politics to play out. Differences in religion, ethnicity, cultural values, and individual personalities are highly exhibited directly or indirectly in the organization.

One of the earliest works on the subject politics was done by Machiavelli where he buttressed the point that "the end justifies the means and anything was acceptable in the course of ensuring effective state protection". This emphatically suggests some mechanisms or strategies, to obtain and hold onto power through political activity. Accordingly, politics have been in existence from time and even pre-dated the establishment of business organizations. Politics is as old as man's existence, and as such man is the one who carries politics into the organization. He does this in order to enhance existing power or to offset the power of another, the purpose being to increase the certainty that a particular and preferred course of action will be followed (Mayes and Allen, 1997). However, irrespective of the outcome of any form of organizational politics, some people consider it to be negative while some others see it as a positive venture. The positive view of politics is that it is an inevitable part of the needs of individuals and groups to function in a collective organizational context. The negative view sees politics as a process that actively inhibits the effective running of organizations where decisions are made.

Over the years, with the advent of globalization, multicultural presence has become one of the fates of modern organizations. The imperativeness of this has resulted in an increased diverse workforce. The fact that organizations exist with people from diverse cultural, racial, gender, religious affiliations, etc, brings about certain behavioural traits from the individuals who relay organizational politics. The drive to always have things done in a way favourable to them, has made people become interested and partake in political activities such as lobbying, favouritism, tribalism, etc in the course of the daily operations of the organization. The term, diversity, has always been part of corporate and management calculus, even though it might not have been given a name in the far past. As far as man exists, differences are sure to abound. However, the way it was perceived in the past

had been very much different from the way it is currently being viewed. A cultural universal commonality to all organizations then, was the exercise of power and authority. Inevitably, the struggle for power and authority involves politics, which political scientists defined as the understanding of who gets what, when, and how he gets it.

2. Statement of problem

Despite the fact that diversity in organizations has seized the attention of researchers with substantial research outcomes, still, a vast portion of the question remains unanswered. Its corresponding relationship with organizational politics has not been fully exploited, and as such, calls for immense research. This scenario has incited the present study.

3. Purpose of the study

This article broadly explores the concepts of diversity and organizational politics to achieve the following specific objectives:

- i. Examine how diversity is established in the organization;
- ii. Evaluate the extent to which diversity affects the attitude of individuals or groups in the organization;
- iii. Investigate the different forms of politics played in the organization; and
- iv. Identify strategies for managing diversity as well as politics related issues in the organization.

4. Theoretical framework

Theories on diversity and diversity management within the study of organizations began to develop in the 80s, mainly under the influence of managerial reports pointing towards the increasing variety of the future workforce (Jansens and Steyaert, 2003). Thus, the social identity theory; embedded intergroup theory; organization demography theory and the research on racioethnicity theory are commonplace postulates. However, the social identity theory and embedded intergroup theory are considered germane to this study.

4.1. The social identity theory (SIT)

Diversity is seen as a mixture of people with different group identities within the same social system. The SIT has been one of the most prominent intergroup theories informing us about group identities in organizations. It has continued to be one of the theories scholars employ to examine cases of diversity in organizations. SIT was first thought by Tajfel in the 70s and Turner in the 80s. SIT is a cognitive theory, which holds that individuals tend to classify themselves and others into social categories and that these classifications have significant effects on human interactions. Hogg and Terry (2000) further integrated SIT and its extension - self-categorization theory. Self-categorization theory is used to explicitly describe the process by which aspects of one's self-concept translates into context related cognition and behaviour. Studies have shown that diverse identities have been salient to group boundaries.

4.2 Embedded intergroup relation theory

Like SIT, this theory falls under the generic rubric of intergroup perspectives. However, Alderfer and Smith (1982) proposed this theory, which explicitly integrates identity group membership and group membership resulting from organizational categorization. The theory posits that two forms of groups exist within organizations - the identity groups, groups whose members share some common biological characteristics, etc and the organizational group - whose members share common organizational positions and participate in equivalent work experiences, resulting in relatively consonant world views. With this theory, individuals and organizations are constantly attempting to manage potential conflicts arising from the interface between identity groups and organizational group membership.

In view of the foregoing, the embedded intergroup relation theory thus, becomes the omnibus of this work. The significance of the embedded intergroup theory for understanding identity is its attention to the effects of diverse identities within a larger organizational context. With the continual appreciation diversity in organizations has gained over the years, one cannot help but see the elements of this theory in operation. It recognizes the fact that individuals don't leave their racial, gender, or ethnic identities at the door when they enter the organization. This inarguably, further breeds insights to the play of politics in organization side by side carrying out business operations.

The theory suggests that identity group categorization will always be relevant in an organizational context in that when managers are aware of these facts, they would be better prepared (proactive) to tackle any negativity that both diversity and politics might attract to the organization.

5. Methodology

This study is exploratory and predominantly employed information from both secondary and primary sources.

Hence, much of the data were accessed through the review of necessary documents, journals, scholarly data, texts, the internet etc, which gave us an in-depth insight into the subject matter. This is premised on the fact that a pretorial of literature graces the concepts of diversity and organizational politics.

6. Conceptual framework of diversity and diversity management

Literarily, there has not been a universal consensus as to how diversity should be described because of the multidisciplinary views associated with the subject matter. Diversity ordinarily, expresses assortment, heterogeneity or variety. Jassens and Steyaert (2003) opine that the striking of variation in categories is the difference between authors who are interested in the effect of diversity on organizations from a more economical perspective and authors who study diversity from a moral or ethical perspective. Nkomo and Stewart (2006), define diversity as a mixture of people with different group identities within the same social system. Ragins and Gonzalez (2003) note that any attempt to summarize the field, places one on a slippery slope. However, it is clear that diversity refers to identities based on membership in social and demographic groups and how differences affect social relations in organizations.

Thomas (1991) sees diversity to mean more than race and gender in the workplace. He believes, it can be related to lifestyle tenure, position in the organization, age, sexual preference, functional specialty or geographical location. Edewor and Aluko (2007), emphasize that diversity has a real complex and powerful impact on organizations.

Diversity is the reality created by individuals and groups from a broad spectrum of demographic and philosophical differences (Micah, 2004). Whatever form diversity comes, it is admittedly a force that could halt the flow of productivity in an organization if not well articulated and managed to be seen as an advantage by all players in the organization (i.e. both management and employees). To Mba and Eze (2013), diversity is a source of creativity and innovation that can provide the organization an opportunity for future development and competitive advantage. Inyang (2008) considers diversity as an organizational reality, which has attracted a great deal more attention, from different spheres of life. It is seen as the differences among members of a group or a social unit. It encompasses the ways in which we differ, our various peculiarities and distinctiveness.

Diversity has been conceptually associated with individual differences at either “surface level” (which refers to easily observable or identifiable characteristics such as race gender, age) or “deep level” (which refers to differences that may not be directly observable, but are important characteristics of the individual, such as personality and value system).

Managing the challenges in the workforce of an organization is the notion of diversity management. Lorbiecki and Jack (2000) opine that diversity management perpetuates rather than combat inequalities in the workplace; diminishes the legacy of discrimination against historically repressed minorities in the workplace; continues to prescribe essentialist categories of difference; and presents problematic dualisms for effective organizational change.

According to Kertsen (2000), diversity management seeks to re-assert the privacy of the corporate sphere and its employment decision, making its emergence a significant element of the general sociopolitical attempt to manage and contain racial conflict and social contradiction. It should be considered as the mediated outcome of the dialectical tensions that exist around issues of race, equality, organization and society. Diversity management advocates a systematic transformation of the organization as opposed to the singular emphasis on recruitment and selection that were the characteristics of the older methods. Its aim is to change the organizational culture in certain ways to make it open, welcoming and supportive to all people.

Managing diversity implies a holistic focus in order to create an organizational environment that allows for all employees to reach their full potential in pursuing the company’s goals (Thomas and Ely, 1996). Though, through encounters and training programmes, people are becoming gradually more aware of the invisible barrier in the organization. Fleury (1999) sees diversity management as a process that is aimed at developing competences necessary for business growth and success. Therefore, managing diversity is geared towards adding value to the organization. Thus, it becomes imperative for managers to try to understand and take cognizance of these factors in order to thrive better.

7. Benefits of diversity management

Diversity management has become and should remain part and parcel of management practices, since diversity efforts in the workplace facilitate the exchange of new perspectives, improve problem solving by inviting different ideas, and create a respectful, accepting work environment, all of which contribute to successful organizational performance. Kauzya (2001) believes that in managing diversity, one should consider diversity as a resource input that needs to be analyzed, understood, quantified, planned, monitored and evaluated.

Organizations are beginning to understand the magnitude of benefits attached to having a diverse workforce’s creative, fresh approach and innovative thinking. It provides a broader range of knowledge, skills and abilities, better decisions based on different perspectives; better services to a heterogeneous population; and

pursuing excellent performance from the entire labour pool.

It is argued that diversity makes the organization more competitive in the labour market, allows for better recruitment, and retention of qualified employees, create higher level of productivity, creativity and group synergy, and generates more effective ways to managing conflict in the organization (Kersten, 2000). It is considered as an instrumental goal designed to enhance the overall effectiveness of the business itself, which becomes problematic particularly when the interests of diversity collide with the interest of organizational efficiency.

8. Diversity and organizational politics

Politics in organization is an inevitable fact. It goes on and on beyond generational influences, breaking all barriers in the society. Inyang (2008) sees organizational politics to involve plans, tactics and strategies employed to seize, withhold and utilize power in organizations to achieve individual personal goals. Accordingly, organizational politics tend to have profound influence on the effectiveness of the workforce. It is considered to be an intentional process of strategically designing behaviours to maximize, short term or long term interests. Sometimes organizational politics can come in form of coalitions. This political behaviour reflects an intention to influence other people in some ways. Organizational politics is borne out of individuals' desire to gain the willpower to turn situations to their favour. Arguing in this direction, Gummer (1990), Hoefler (1995) and Pfeffer (1992) in their different studies posited that organizational politics is actually a consequence of wide disagreements between and/or among people in an organization over their different interests.

Contrary to the above position, some authors see organizational politics as a constructive tool in an organization's life cycle. They argue further that political skills should be considered as necessary prerequisite for managers to use effectively in handling divergent perspectives. Correspondingly, Butcher and Clarke (2003) say politics is an essential ingredient in bringing together stakeholders whose intentions and goals are in conflict. Also, Klenke (2003) emphasizes on the role of organizational politics in enhancing decision making processes at the corporate level, power building at the group or unit level, and series of political behaviour at the individual level. The concept of organizational politics is dependent on the perception of employees in an organization. This perception to a large extent is steered from their different cultural and religious influences. In a study carried out by Beaty, Adonisi and Taylor (2007), they expressed emphatically that no matter the gender differences of individuals, organizational politics remain constant in the science of the organization.

Diversity has taken a new and increasingly complicated form. It compels the manager to balance the claims of efficiency and profit making with the demand for social inclusiveness and equal opportunity (Balogun, 2001). Recognizing that diversity exists is not simply tolerating conflicting primary loyalties; it goes beyond to the conflict issues arising from differences in thought patterns. The need to have an exceeding overriding edge in individual or group thought patterns creates the room for the out play of organizational politics. There is no doubt as to if diversity breeds conflict, yes it can, but also can be managed to yield positive results.

Organizational politics can be seen as having positive influence in an organization when it is linked to the achievement of success and goals in some ways (Martin, 2004). Consequently, because of one's ethnicity, one is enclosed in some realities and simultaneously excluded from others. The fact that some ethnic groups are exposed to more resources that empowered them through education and wealth due to an advantaged positive of having their kindreds in the government system, might have heightened ethnic identity among people. This transcends into the level of politics such individuals or groups tend to command in the organization among other people.

Most managers recognize the dual nature of politics in organization. They intuitively understand that it contains elements of both good and bad and that it can be an important, indeed inevitable aspect of the work experience. Gandz and Murray (1980) in their study on how managers perceive politics concluded that the existence of politics is common to most organizations. The challenge for managers and organizations, therefore, is to create a condition in which employees have the opportunity to individually describe themselves. Thomas (1991) consonantly, posits that tapping fully the human resource potential of every member of the workforce should be the goal of any organization. Bozeman, Hochwarier, Perrewe and Brymer (2001) in their study: 'moderating influences of perceived control on relationship between organizational politics and organizational commitment', suggest that there is relationship between politics and certain dysfunctional attitudes. Cropanzano, Homes, Grandey and Toth (1997) view organizational politics to be related to negative work outcomes. Organizational politics, overtime, has been found to be a relative consequence of peoples' behaviour shaped by diversity.

According to Martins (2004) politics in organization can be as a result of any or a combination of the following:

- To be able to control communication channels in the organization.
- Effective use of outsourced specialists is only known to either the individual or the group.
- To have control over work and meeting agendas.

- As a way of game playing (distraction).
- To create impression about something or someone that in turn could influence events.
- To establish coalitions.
- To have superior power over decision making criteria in the organization.

Madison, Allen, Porter, Renwick and Mayes (1980), see politics as related to power, uncertainty and importance of the issue to the organization and to the individual. Certain criteria have to be met in order for any behaviour to be considered political such as intention and a desire to influence outcomes (Mayes and Allen, 1977). Many studies on politics and organization are concerned with social interactions among individuals and groups and their impact on the larger system. The urge to exercise one's will over others, or put in another way, the will to have control over the behaviour of others is by exercising power, which can mostly be achieved through organizational politics. Political relationships can involve big organizations, small groups, or even people in an intimate association. Often times, the existence and activities of organizational politics tend to contradict Max Weber's ideal type of organization – bureaucracy - (Schaefer, 2005). While the ideal type of organization presents a conceptualized tool for measuring how bureaucratic an actual organization should be, organizational politics on the other hand, allows for certain corners to be cut without due process.

9. Managing diverse political behaviour in the organization

There is no particular sure way of handling political activities of individuals or groups. The degree to which it is possible to manage political behaviour in people is difficult to ascertain (Martins, 2004). Politics in the organization depends highly on the personality of the individual or the management style operational in the organization. This can go a long way to influence their predisposition for playing any form of politics there is. The competition for resources and power also breeds avenue for politics in the organization, in that there are never enough resources to circulate.

To reduce these unnecessary or arbitrary influences, several measures need to be put in place. Rationing is one way to attempt to control and minimize these harmful effects of politics. It implies deciding between competing options for allocating scarce resources and seeking ways to prioritize alternative options. Rationing aids competition without allowing hidden agendas to flourish. Specifying in advance how decisions will be made by not allowing power to become a means of acquiring resources is just another way that can be encouraged.. Through this measure some control of political activities can be achieved. Another way of controlling politicking in the organization is by sending very clear early signals that it will not be tolerated and dealing severely with obvious cases and encouraging examples to be openly discussed. These have been studied to have very great influence in minimizing its impact. Other strategies for managing organizational politics include:

- i. Appealing to the logic of the situation – the power needed for this strategy needs be relevant to the logic behind the situation.
- ii. Saying the right thing – this strategy establishes transaction and relies on creating an obligation to return positive value at some future point in time.
- iii. Doing favours – applying doing favour to secure power needed to go well beyond the bounds of duty.
- iv. Being indispensable – creating a strong dependency, where one's avoidable absence is highly felt.
- v. Infiltrating the decision making process – this strategy is perceived as one of the most important political maneuver in that you can still influence decision making even if not directly involved.
- vi. Withholding resource – applicable when one is in position of holding resources which others want.
- vii. Sharing beliefs – When one shares his/her beliefs with large number of people, they tend to feel involved and accepted.

10. Conclusion and Recommendations

With the advent of globalization, multicultural presence has become one of the fates of modern organizations. The fact that organizations exist with people from diverse cultural, racial, gender, religious affiliations, etc, brings about certain behavioural traits from the individuals who relay organizational politics. The term, diversity, has always been part of corporate and management calculus, even though it might not have been given a name in the far past. As far as man exists, differences are sure to abound. The social identity theory; embedded intergroup theory; organization demography theory and the research on racioethnicity theory are commonplace postulates, which address the issues of diversity and politics in the organization. Organizational politics is seen as having positive influence in an organization when it is linked to the achievement of success and goals in some ways. Politics in the organization depends highly on the personality of the individual or the management style operational in the organization. The competition for resources and power also breeds avenue for politics in the

organization, in that there are never enough resources to circulate. Organizational politics has been found to be a relative consequence of peoples' behaviour shaped by diversity. The challenge for managers and organizations, therefore, is to create a condition in which employees have the opportunity to individually describe themselves. Tapping fully the human resource potential of every member of the workforce should be the goal of any organization. There is no doubt as to if diversity breeds conflict, yes it can, but also can be managed to yield positive results.

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