Views from another stakeholder: Trade union perspectives on the rhetoric of 'Managing Diversity'

Anne-marie Greene* and Gill Kirton**

WARWICK PAPERS IN INDUSTRIAL RELATIONS

NUMBER 74

June 2004

Industrial Relations Research Unit
University of Warwick
Coventry
CV4 7AL
UK

* University of Warwick Business School
** Queen Mary, University of London
e-mail: IROBAG@wbs.ac.uk

Editor's forward

The Warwick Papers in Industrial Relations series publishes the work of members of the Industrial Relations Research Unit and people associated with it. The papers may be of topical interest or require presentation outside the normal conventions of a journal article. A formal editorial process ensures that standards of quality and objectivity are maintained.

This paper, by Anne-marie Greene and Gill Kirton, presents a critical evaluation of the concept of 'Managing Diversity', a term which has gained popular currency in recent years in HR circles. In particular, the authors seek to analyse the meanings and implications of the 'Managing Diversity' approach for trade unions. They argue that though the new discourse may be viewed in part merely as a case of 'the Emperor's new clothes', it also has the potential to undermine trade union equality efforts by a process of de-collectivisation and de-politicisation. The paper will be of wide interest to all those concerned with workplace equality.

Jim Arrowsmith

Views from another stakeholder: Trade union perspectives on the rhetoric of 'Managing Diversity'

Anne-marie Greene and Gill Kirton

Abstract

While there has been much recent debate about 'Managing Diversity' in management arenas, this article aims to fill a gap by presenting a trade union perspective on 'Managing Diversity' in Britain. We contend that the popular managerial discourse of 'Managing Diversity', with its individualistic and business case focus, has from a trade union perspective, potentially negative consequences for achieving equality for those at lower ends of the organisational hierarchy. Drawing on interviews with officials from the British Trades Union Congress (TUC) and seven unions in Britain, we discuss the problems, tensions and challenges associated with the rhetoric of 'Managing Diversity' in unionised settings. We offer a framework that begins to try and resolve some of these tensions, distinguishing between a narrow managerialist concept of 'Managing Diversity', and that of 'diversity management', which as we frame it offers more space for collectivist ideology and interventions.

Introduction

Diversity or 'difference' approaches have become more dominant in recent managerial rhetoric regarding equality management in Britain. This is in contrast to the 'sameness' agenda of traditional liberal 'equal opportunities' (Jewson and Mason, 1986), which pervaded the policy approaches of both employers and unions in the 1970s and 1980s. There have been a number of articles, debates and policy statements regarding 'Managing Diversity' [1] in particular considering whether 'Managing Diversity' is simply a name change or a new policy approach to equality management, delivering significantly different outcomes. At the same time, academics and practitioners in the trade union arena have also begun to increasingly talk about the need to recognise, value and meet the needs of the diversity of union membership.

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1 We place the term 'Managing Diversity' in inverted commas to denote its popular usage as a set of management-led initiatives anchored in an individualistic, utilitarian framework (Kirton and Greene, 2000).

However as yet, the ways in which British trade unions have responded to the implementation of 'Managing Diversity' in unionised settings has gained only limited coverage. This is significant for a number of reasons. First because although there has been a significant decline in trade union membership in Britain over the last twenty years, unionised settings still account for around 45% of British workplaces (over 25 employees), employing 62 per cent of the workforce (Cully et al, 1999). Second, Dickens (1999) compares the relative advantages of a legislative, business case or joint regulatory approach. We feel that there is still significant value in exploring the joint regulation of the employment relationship, which in the British context primarily involves trade union and employer interactions, and therefore necessitates an exploration of trade union viewpoints. Specifically, we examine the joint regulatory approach to equality management, and the place of 'Managing Diversity' discourses within this. Third, there have been recent concerns in wider public policy forums about the alarming deterioration in conditions of work for those British employees at lower levels of the organisational hierarchy (Taylor, 2002). Additionally, there has been debate in academic arenas about the failure of current equality interventions to address the problems of inequality faced by those most disadvantaged (Webb, 1997). A joint regulatory approach to equality management is arguably more concerned about the 'sticky floor' than with the 'glass ceiling'; that is with those employees at lower levels of organisations who are more likely to be trade union members (Cully et al, 1999). To date however, we know little about what 'Managing Diversity' initiatives look like, and what they might achieve for employees at lower organisational levels, arguably those who face the greatest inequalities.

While there has been more recent recognition by British trade unions of membership diversity, we contend that the use of the term in the trade union arena is different to, and in conflict with, that espoused in the most common ideal types of the 'Managing Diversity' approach. Key tensions and conflicts involve two main dichotomies: first, that 'Managing Diversity' has an individualistic rather than collectivist focus; and second, the primacy of the business over the social justice case for equality within 'Managing Diversity'. We argue that trade unions in Britain are engaging with discourses of 'diversity' but in terms that retain the importance of equality agendas based around social group membership and the need for collectivised action. This we believe can have significant implications for equality management policy and practice

within unionised workplaces. Whilst, conceptually, some authors criticise a view of 'Managing Diversity' and equal opportunities as in opposition (Gagnon and Cornelius, 2002: 14), we argue that in unionised settings, tensions and conflicts certainly exist from the point of view of one of the major stakeholders, namely trade unions (see also Wrench, 2003). This could have policy implications regarding the ways that trade unions engage with management and employers who are involved in 'Managing Diversity' interventions.

Our enquiry is ultimately concerned with looking at ways that, theoretically, some of the tensions and conflicts can be resolved, to which end we have developed the following framework (Figure 1 overleaf). On the left-hand side we delineate the more familiar version of the 'Managing Diversity' approach, common in mainstream practitioner guides and text books. On the right hand side, we develop a new, more collectivist framework of 'diversity management' drawing on critiques of 'Managing Diversity'. While the two terms are often used synonymously (see Lorbiecki and Jack, 2000), we feel it is apposite to distinguish between the concept of 'Managing Diversity', now associated with narrow managerialist interventions, and that of 'diversity management', which we use to convey collectivist ideology and interventions.

The relevance and appropriateness of this framework is discussed in more detail within the course of the paper. The discussion is based around the key tensions and conflicts around 'Managing Diversity' in unionised settings, and their effects on *understandings* of theory, strategy and policy. It should be noted that it is not our intention to explore the practice of 'Managing Diversity' in unionised settings rather the views and understandings of trade unions regarding 'Managing Diversity' rhetoric. (The former we have argued stands as a significant gap in the field, and is the subject of an existing research project that we hope to report on in the future http://users.wbs.warwick.ac.uk/group/irru/research/e24). First, we summarise the common characteristics of the 'Managing Diversity' model, frequently found in text books and practitioner guides. Second, we explore in what ways discourses of diversity are infusing the rhetoric and equality strategies of trade unions. Third, through this discussion the tensions and conflicts arising between managerial and trade union discourses of diversity emerge and the potential implications for diversity

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strategy and policy are discussed. Finally we reflect again on the utility of our framework of 'diversity management' and indicate areas for future research.

Figure 1: A Collectivist Framework for Diversity?

	Characteristics of an individualist, utilitarian framework for 'Managing Diversity'	Characteristics of a collectivist, moral framework for 'Diversity Management'
Rhetoric	Difference seen primarily as an organisational resource ('neo-business case' discourse)	Difference seen as a primary source of negative stereotyping and discrimination ('social foundations of discrimination' discourse)
	Difference is individually based	Difference is group based
	'Sameness' is de-emphasised, whilst 'difference' is emphasised	'Sameness' (i.e. common ties between people) is recognised. 'Sameness' and 'difference' co-exist
Strategy	'HRM': Top-down, management-led: employees are the objects of management policy	'Industrial Relations': Stakeholder, partnership approach: employees are active in formulating organisational policy initiatives
	Unitarist: The conflicts, dilemmas and problems of implementation are played down	Pluralist, collectivist: The conflicts, dilemmas and problems are discussed with 'stakeholder' groups, e.g. trade unions, community groups
	Policies must make a direct contribution to short term profit-driven goals.	There is a social justice as well as a business case for policies. Policies may only indirectly contribute to longer term business goals.
Policy	Policy levers would include performance-related-pay, performance appraisal, personal development plans	Policy levers would include targeted training programmes, attention to 'special needs' of diverse groups
	Policy levers would focus on internal diversity within the organisation amongst existing workforce	Policy levers would pay attention to both internal diversity and ensuring that recruitment procedures encouraged a diversity of applicants.
	Monitoring and evaluation of diversity initiatives would be based around meeting individual needs and concerns.	Monitoring and evaluation of diversity initiatives, while considering meeting individual needs, would also pay attention to the effect on groups of employees, and aim to ensure consistency of treatment across the workforce.

Research underpinning the analysis

The primary research the paper draws on is qualitative interview fieldwork, involving nine key trade union officials holding responsibility for equalities issues in seven selected British trade unions and the British TUC. The unions are AUT, Connect, CWU, GMB, GPMU, PCS and Prospect (2). These unions together represent a broad spectrum of employees in professional, white- and blue-collar occupations and the public and private sectors. The interviews took place between October 2001 and June 2002, and were semi-structured around a broad framework of questions, but which allowed enough space for respondents to talk in depth about related issues. All interviews were tape-recorded and transcribed. The paper draws on those interviews to consider the ways in which diversity discourses have influenced trade union thinking and strategy on equalities issues.

A shift towards 'Managing Diversity'

This part of the discussion refers primarily to the left-hand side of Figure 1. It is self-evident that policies within the workplace are influenced by wider economic, political and ideological trends. Thus a shift in thought about equality also accompanied the trend of the late 1980s and 1990s towards deregulation, flexibility, new managerialism and Human Resource Management (HRM) (Webb, 1997). Generally, this shift in direction has involved a move away from traditional liberal and radical conceptions (Jewson and Mason, 1986) of equality management, based around treating everyone the same - a 'sameness' approach - towards approaches based around recognising and valuing people's differences – a 'difference' or 'diversity' approach (Liff, 1997). This movement in direction is perhaps most pronounced in the recent popularity of the concept of 'Managing Diversity', avidly proclaimed by British management practitioner bodies such as the (now Chartered) Institute of Personnel and Development as a new way forward in equality policy and practice (IPD, 1996).

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2 AUT represents academic staff in universities; Connect represents non-technical, white-collar middle to senior level employees in British Telecom; CWU represents British Telecom engineers and clerical employees and also staff in the Post Office; GMB is a general union organising in both the public and private sectors; GPMU represents employees in the print and media industries; PCS represents staff in the Civil Service; Prospect represents technical and specialist staff in the Civil Service. It is clear that there are some notable exceptions i.e. Unison and TGWU, where interviews could not be arranged and we hope to include these unions in the future research discussed later.

There are already in existence a number of detailed critiques of 'Managing Diversity', in particular the way in which it differs from more traditional 'equal opportunities' approaches, together with evaluations of its strengths and weaknesses (3). Typical constructions find 'managing diversity' variously presented as an evolutionary step from equality (Institute of Personnel Development: Kandola and Fullerton, 1994; 1998; Johnstone, 2002); a sophistication of the equality approach (Rubin in Overell, 1996); a repackaging of equality (Ford, 1996); or more negatively as a sanitised, politically unthreatening and market-oriented notion (Webb, 1996; Kaler, 2001), or a 'comfort zone', allowing employers to avoid actively fighting discrimination (Ouseley in Overell, 1996). It is certain that there is no one definition of the 'Managing Diversity' approach (and similarly, we recognise, there may be a diversity of 'managing diversity' approaches!). However, we are interested in what has underpinned the most common managerialist models of 'Managing Diversity' in the UK context (e.g. Kandola and Fullerton, 1994, 1998) and the ways in which this is viewed and utilised by trade unionists with responsibility for promoting the equality and diversity agenda within organisations. Variations notwithstanding, most writers converge on the following four essential dimensions of the common 'Managing Diversity' approach.

First, at the heart of 'Managing Diversity' lies the premise that *individual* differences should be positively recognised, nurtured and rewarded rather than denied or diluted. In line with Figure 1, difference is viewed as being individually based. A key feature of the 'Managing Diversity' approach (which will be discussed in greater detail later) is thus its individualistic policy focus (Liff and Wajcman, 1996), moving away from standardised procedures to eliminate discrimination and positive action to redress historic disadvantage of particular social groups. By moving the focus away from discrimination and disadvantage the equality agenda is arguably depoliticized or rendered less sensitive to backlash from already 'advantaged' groups and individuals (Sinclair, 2000).

Connected to the first, the second dimension of 'Managing Diversity' is that it involves a broader range of people than the social groups usually covered in 'equal

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3 For example, Cornelius 2002; Noon and Ogbonna, 2001; Kaler, 2001; Lorbiecki and Jack, 2000; Liff, 1999, 1997; Liff and Wacjman, 1996; Miller, 1996; Webb, 1997; Rees, 1998; Personnel Review, 2000, Vol. 29: 3; Cox, 1994.

opportunities' policies, moving beyond categories such as race, gender and disability towards more individual differences. Of particular note is the inclusion of individual 'non-visible' differences and personal characteristics such as 'work style' (Kandola and Fullerton, 1998). Thus looking at the 'policy' section of the framework (Figure 1), interventions within 'Managing Diversity' should move away from collective social group action towards action on the basis of individual employee differences.

Third, the individualistic aspects of 'Managing Diversity' also involve the policy-making process as well as the type of interventions, where the supremacy of management in initiating action and mobilising support for policies is highlighted (the 'strategy' section of Figure 1). Indeed Dale (1997) states that a specific parallel can be drawn between 'Managing Diversity' and HRM, where HRM is regarded as the discovery of personnel management by chief executives and 'Managing Diversity' is regarded as the capturing of the territory of equal opportunities by managers. The top-down control, direction and leadership from the management level is a core feature in many 'Managing Diversity' textbooks and practitioner guides (for example Kandola and Fullerton, 1998). It is often difficult to locate the role of employees themselves or their representatives within the policy-making process. Indeed, the organisations that are held up as exemplars of 'Managing Diversity' are predominantly non-union (Kandola and Fullerton, 1994; Liff, 1999). Therefore it has been argued that some of the debates about the threat which some variants of HRM pose to trade unions (Guest, 1987) are equally salient with regard to 'Managing Diversity'.

Fourth, 'Managing Diversity' aims to specifically meet organisational goals: in this sense the concept or model is business-driven, rather than underpinned by broader notions of social justice (Kaler, 2001). Indeed Noon and Ogbonna (2001) argue that this is the key analytical differentiation between 'Equal Opportunities' and 'Managing Diversity': that they are underpinned by two different rationales – the former by the social justice (or moral) case and the latter by the business case. As noted in Figure 1, difference is primarily seen as an organisational resource. While 'Equal Opportunities' policies may utilise business rationales to achieve moral/social justice ends, 'Managing Diversity' policies can be seen to have an exclusive focus on business case (Kaler, 2001: 59). Thus, 'Managing Diversity' appeals to critics of traditional equality approaches, who have argued that the moral cause of 'equality'

has little purchase in the competitive world of business. Thus, the diversity of the workforce is valued as a direct contribution to the success of an organisation.

The next section sets up the context for the development of the right hand side of the framework (Figure 1). It discusses typical trade union equality strategies and some tensions which arise regarding the key dimensions of 'Managing Diversity', in particular, the individualist rather than collectivist focus of both policy-making and policy intervention; and the primacy of the business case rather than social justice case for equality management.

Trade Unions as equality agents

Here the complex dual role of trade unions should be noted, namely, their internal equality action within their own organisational hierarchies as employers, in addition to their external equality action, engaging with employers at workplace level on equality issues as representatives. These roles are not mutually exclusive, and often overlap.

Through representative union structures, women, black members and other 'disadvantaged' social groups are able to influence workplace bargaining and negotiations, as well as national union policies. In other words, members are able to voice their own needs, rather than leaving the union officialdom or employers to decide upon equality initiatives. This is important because, as stated earlier, in the shift towards 'Managing Diversity', equality policies have become more business driven, whereas the union role is to consider the benefits to the workforce within the overall aim of social justice. Therefore, in unionised workplaces there is, theoretically, a counterbalancing force concerned with people and not simply profit or other organisational goals. Indeed, there is some evidence of the positive effect of trade union presence on equality initiatives at the workplace. For example, WERS data indicates that workplaces with recognised trade unions were more likely to have developed formal equal opportunities policies than non unionised firms (4) (Cully et al, 1999; Hoque and Noon, 2002).

Overall, traditional liberal 'sameness' models of equal opportunities have shaped the policy strategies and interventions of trade unions over the last twenty years. This has

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4 Though trade union representation is more common in the public sector and large workplaces where arguably you might expect to find more established equal opportunities policies.

led critics to assert that the agenda has not been as progressive as it might have been (Colling and Dickens, 2001). Traditionally unions have assumed that people working within the same industry, organisation or occupation shared the same interests and therefore the same objectives in relation to their employers and their employment. These supposed common interests have been used to build solidarity among groups of employees. However, this has led to traditionally narrow union bargaining agendas, which have been widely criticised for failing to take account of the diversity of union membership (for example, Cockburn, 1991; Dickens, 1997; Ellis, 1988; Rees, 1992). The narrow nature of these bargaining agendas derives in part at least from the fact that British trade union decision-making structures are unrepresentative of membership diversity, with the various levels of union government remaining dominated by middle-aged, white men (Dickens, 1997).

Unions have feared that highlighting a wider plurality of interests might undermine solidarity and thereby union power. This philosophy has been evident in typical equality interventions within internal trade union organisation, which have largely been enacted through 'positive action' initiatives. However, it should be noted that in more recent years, policy actions have moved far more towards the 'radical' end of equal opportunities, such as women-only education, race equality committees, and reserved seats for women on decision-making bodies (Greene and Kirton, 2002; Kirton and Greene, 2002; McBride, 2001; Parker, 2002, 2003). More recently, the need to recognise a plurality of interests within diverse groups of union members has begun to diffuse in both the academic and practitioner trade union arenas, discussed in the next section.

Trade Union Engagement with Discourses of Diversity

Munro (2001) calls for a new feminist trade union agenda which includes a 'sensitivity to diversity' (2001: 454) and points to the continuing neglect of the interests of working class and black women. Hyman's analysis (1997; 1995) offers some further elaboration, recognising the way in which interests as citizens, as well as more personalised life-style concerns are forming part (or should form part) of trade union representation. These arguments have echoes of a diversity approach to equality management.

Likewise, the union officers we interviewed recognised that they represented heterogeneous groups of union members. As an officer at the TUC stated:

"So, do unions and others talk about diversity within groups? Well of course they do. In the area of race equality, there has been a determination to call everybody black and to talk about the commonalities of discrimination that people experience, but there is still awareness that there are differences within [those] *groups."* (TUC)

Therefore, there is recognition of a need to recognise diversity within social groups as well as what members of the groups have in common. Indeed, most of the union officers we spoke to viewed the extension of the equality agenda beyond the traditional 'equal opportunities' target groups as positive. For instance:

'I would see diversity as trying to get the best out of people regardless of particular perceptions about where they come from, their background, their colour or ethnicity, gender, whatever. In that sense it's purely equal opportunity rather than endowing them with a set of baggage that may not be accurate.' (Connect)

However, this does not necessarily mean that unions want to take up the 'Managing Diversity' discourse in the same way as many employers. As the TUC officer continued from the quote above, while unions had to recognise diversity within groups:

"..talking to unions.. there's a great deal of scepticism about changes in terminology... we've been aware that within the human resources world.. there's been a lot of talk about managing diversity, and we've very deliberately kept out of those kind of discussions" (TUC).

Thus, the TUC line was to deliberately avoid using the language of 'Managing Diversity' in the same terms as employers use it. It is easy to see why unions might avoid the discourse of 'Managing Diversity' because it is difficult to identify the place of trade unions (or a broader commitment to a joint regulatory approach) within the common rhetoric of 'Managing Diversity'. This is despite the fact that many unionised employers do appear to be talking about 'Managing Diversity'. Indeed in our study, only the GPMU officer stated that 'Managing Diversity' was not something the union was engaged with. This was felt to be because the print industry was still at the very earliest stages of equality policies, which is a discussion point we return to later. The issue is that, from the union point of view, the theoretical model of equality

associated with 'diversity' is commonly perceived as a purely managerialist intervention. For example, officers commented:

"We would talk equal rights... whereas the equality issues are more in the hands of the trade union people…[diversity] *it's more in the hands of the human resources people, that there's a kind of diversity industry springing up'* (GMB)

"..this [diversity] *is about valuing the individual. We don't have a problem with it in itself, but it's the idea that management are going to deliver that as opposed to the individuals being part of setting the agenda collectively"* (GPMU)

Thus, from the point of view of the TUC, it was important that unions continued to engage with the language of equal opportunities:

".. we know that using the terminology of equal opportunities has become very outdated but we don't mind that.. if the human resources professionals want to talk about managing diversity, well that's fine, but we'll just get on with what we think is important as before" (TUC)

Discussion of the ways in which diversity elements exist within a more conventional equal opportunities agenda will be discussed in the following sections, and form part of the basis of our collectivist framework for 'diversity management' (right hand side of Figure 1).

The 'Managing Diversity' focus on the individual

Some may view initial scepticism regarding 'Managing Diversity' as being short-sighted on the part of the unions, however, there does appear to be substance behind the scepticism. Sticking with 'equal opportunities', which some consider (in the words of the TUC) to be 'outdated terminology'*,* may in fact be justified, as a political gesture, in placing the emphasis on particular areas of practice and on particular elements of the equality agenda within policy-making. Thus reflecting on the 'rhetoric' section of Figure 1, a major distinguishing feature of a collective approach to 'diversity management' is that there is still an emphasis on difference as a group based, rather than an individual concept.

It is the individualised focus of the 'Managing Diversity' discourse which represents a principal source of conflict between trade union philosophy on equality management and the rhetoric of 'Managing Diversity'. The potential for unions to act as agents of

transformation largely derives from their capacity to inject a collective voice into equality and diversity policy development. There are therefore a number of specific issues of individualisation inherent within 'Managing Diversity' which are relevant to a discussion of the role of trade unions. Here we identify four main problem areas: first, that associated with policies based on a view that all individual differences are equal; second, that involved with developing a business case around equality actions; third, that involved with the introspective nature of Managing Diversity; and fourth, that associated with the lack of collective support for individuals.

The problems associated with individual differences

Within a managerialist conception of the 'Managing Diversity' approach, individual differences appear to be viewed equally, so that personality or characteristics such as 'work-style' are seen as being as significant as, and independent of, gender or ethnicity (Kirton and Greene, 2000; Sinclair, 2000), or at least they remain undifferentiated. Significantly, the varying impacts of certain 'differences' are not given enough consideration. Moreover, everyone is different from everyone else in an infinite number of ways, so that it becomes difficult to conceive of specific diversity policy interventions. As a union officer stated:

"… diversity seems to cover everything… Where would you end diversity, it's never-ending" (GMB)

Paradoxically, one could argue that there is an approach of 'sameness' implicit in this type of 'managing diversity' model in that all differences are viewed on the same or similar terms; none are seen as more salient than others in leading to disadvantage in the workplace. We would argue that it is clear that while we need to recognise the transient nature of some forms of disadvantage (for example disability – Woodhams and Danieli 2000, or age – Oswick and Rosenthal 2001), and that all individuals within a social group do not share the same forms of disadvantage all the time, certain identities affect individuals more than others, at least on a macro perspective (and we would argue that race and gender are particularly salient here). Whilst we acknowledge that categorising individuals in reference to their social groupings may be constraining, social group membership needs to be recognised as a fundamental contributing factor to patterns of disadvantage.

Gagnon and Cornelius (2002: 28) emphasise that 'Managing Diversity' does not inherently undermine the position of non-dominant groups, and that this reflects only a narrow definition of the approach. However, we argue that the social group impact is not emphasised within the common UK definitions, and even less so within those from the US (Lorbiecki and Jack, 2000). More implicitly, the discourse of 'Managing Diversity' places the emphasis on individual choice as responsible for differential treatment and conditions at work, rather than recognising the role of discrimination. It emerged that this was seen as a significant problem by the union officers we spoke to, all of whom stated that the fundamental problems of discrimination around social group category needed to be recognised. 'Managing Diversity' was thus regarded as a distraction from what were seen as important equality issues, and reflected a 'watering down', or a much 'softer', less politicised notion of equality action. For example:

"*it sort of becomes a cover-up or not really doing anything... I wouldn't want it to detract from the equality agenda we've got by having this softer term-I mean it is a softer term.*" (GPMU)

"*I deal more with equality policies or equality of opportunity issues, which I see as very kind of political... whereas the concept of diversity is much more nebulous...the danger.. is that equality issues will get submerged...*" (GMB)

Such views also featured in the views of British trade unionists in Wrench's (2003: 68) research comparing British and Danish trade unions. The language used is thus felt to be of significance in policy terms. Similar views were held by the union officers we spoke to. From a union perspective, the 'Managing Diversity' agenda is seen to disregard the realities of disadvantage based around social groups, which in turn is felt to make equality action more palatable for employers:

"*there's a suspicion that managing diversity is all about individuals.. rather than the commonality of disadvantage that some groups can experience...the concept that we still cling to.. is overcoming disadvantage and getting rid of discrimination [which] is not something that employers feel comfortable with*" (TUC)

"*... as far as gender is concerned, there is a tendency not to want to see the realities of gender discrimination, which is still absolutely rife... Diversity can be used in a positive way, but I think it is certainly a danger... diversity is very easy as window-dressing and it's very convenient for management if you don't really want to do*

anything… And of course it individualises, so I suppose to some extent it fits better with management ethos now". (CWU)

"[diversity is] sort of management saying goodbye to equal opportunities, that PC image and the negativity surrounding equal opps and now we have diversity and it makes good business sense. So perhaps it was a bit more palatable for senior managers" (Connect)

Agreeing that policies should not view groups as homogenous and should recognise diversity does not mean an acceptance of the depoliticised discourse of 'Managing Diversity'. Indeed, even those writers who are calling for recognition of 'diversity' by trade unions are not advocating recognition of individual differences to the level which the 'ideal type' approaches suggest. For example, Munro (2001: 454) *'argues for a balance between sensitivity to diversity, and recognition of the continued importance of the <u>key social cleavages of class, gender and race'</u>* (emphasis added). Interventions based around these 'key social cleavages' are precisely those large social groupings that the rhetoric of 'Managing Diversity' argues implicitly against, but which have traditionally formed part of wider trade union equality agendas. Thus within the 'rhetoric' of 'diversity management' (Figure 1), sameness and difference co-exist. Moreover, group-based difference is seen as a primary source of negative stereotyping and discrimination, and conflict is recognised rather than played down.

The problems associated with the business case

'Managing Diversity' prioritises the business case for recognising diversity, however if the approach is conceptualised solely as concerned with individual differences, identified and dealt with on an individual basis, then it becomes very difficult to make a viable business case. This point is made by Woodhams and Danieli (2003) in relation to disability and the appropriateness of 'Managing Diversity' equality interventions. They assert that for 'Managing Diversity' policies to make any kind of practical business case in resource terms, there must be some group-based impact (e.g. apply to more than one individual to be cost-effective). But such a group-based impact is difficult to establish due to the heterogeneous nature of disability (Woodhams and Danieli, 2003), and we would argue the same could be said to apply to many other disadvantaged employees. In addition, the business case requirement

for group-based advantage might be seen as inherently contradictory with the individualised basis of 'Managing Diversity' interventions and policies.

Unions, in contrast, would argue that a business case approach alone is not sufficient to make equality gains, thus supporting the continuing importance of a moral, ethical or social justice case for equality action alongside the business case. This is not to say that unions do not recognise the importance of the business case:

"We have accepted... that if we're going to get anywhere in talking about equality, we have to talk about the business case" (TUC)

However, the moral case also has to underpin policy interventions:

"... we're always concerned about the moral issues and we make the moral arguments, but we've always made the business case arguments as well" (Connect)

In fact, for some of the union officers, this was a deliberate strategy:

"I think there is a real business case you can make.. that happens to support the arguments I would want to make about fairness and justice... But I'm not particularly keen on basing my arguments on the business case. I think fairness and justice have to be something that unions are about." (CWU)

Thus, within the 'strategy' of the 'diversity management' approach in our framework, (Figure 1), the social justice and business cases must coexist, meaning that sometimes, there may only be indirect policy contributions to the 'bottom line'.

The problems associated with the introspective nature of 'Managing Diversity'

The importance of a moral case is particularly salient in contexts where there is little diversity to 'manage'. One striking weakness of the 'Managing Diversity' approach is its introspective nature, focusing more on the movement of people within organisations rather than the problems existing in the wider labour market (Miller, 1996). In some respects, 'Managing Diversity' implicitly presupposes that equality already exists so that difference can be celebrated. As Thomas (1990) points out, you cannot 'manage diversity' unless you have a diverse workforce to begin with. But it is not enough to have a diverse workforce, rather equality of outcome must exist, as evidenced by a fair distribution of jobs, rewards and resources. In concentrating at the post-entry level to organisations, the 'Managing Diversity' approach does not grapple

with significant factors involved in the perpetuation of disadvantage and discrimination outside of the organisation or pre-entry level. This was reflected upon by the union officers we spoke to, who viewed 'Managing Diversity' as something which could only happen once basic levels of equal opportunities had been achieved, which certainly was not the case in the workplaces in which they acted as representatives:

"[diversity] it's about valuing the people you've already got in the company and giving them opportunities... we're still at the level of talking about equality.. overcoming barriers as opposed to that kind of diversity view of managing people to fulfil their potential' (GPMU)

*'The rhetoric of 'Managing Diversity' may paradoxically have most relevance to those individuals who are least disadvantaged on a wider scale. It does less to challenge the wider causes of disadvantage (Webb, 1997). In terms of gender inequality therefore, one could argue that it is thus chiefly middle-class, white women who have made the gains from such an approach (Dickens, 1997; White et al, 1992), not those most relevant to the unionised context, at lower levels in the organisational hierarchy. All of the union officers we spoke to felt that 'Managing Diversity' was something to aspire to, but only once basic equal opportunities work had been enacted, which they all felt was not the case yet:

"Maybe it's too early because we've only really had an equality agenda for five years. It might be a little way down the line before we could think about diversity" (GPMU)

"Managing diversity is actually.. you've got there, or you've got acceptance.. equal opportunities I think is still sort of fighting the battle" (AUT)

"I try not to use the language of the employer in bargaining. Most of the negotiating I'm doing is bringing greater fairness to people in the way they're treated, it's about equalities, it's not really about diversity" (CWU).

The officers spoke specifically of the problems of using a diversity discourse and policies at lower organisational levels and within contexts where there was still a lot of discrimination and prejudice to be challenged:

"I think the business case has always been harder to make in manual blue-collar work than in middle class professional work... it's funny because when I hear people talking about that I always think the chance of them getting to the glass ceiling would

be a fine thing! We are so much behind that, we've got to get off the sticky floor"
(GPMU)

"It's the next big thing, which wouldn't be so bad if we had already achieved some of the building blocks, and I guess that's where my scepticism kicks in... there's all sorts of stuff which hasn't been addressed, like the pay gap, right like the glass ceiling, well the concrete ceiling and the sticky floor.. we really shouldn't be moving on to broadening the debate, we should stick to some of the key issues" (GMB).

We could say that this strikes more of a chord with our collectivist conception of the 'policy' associated with 'diversity management' than with the managerialist discourse of 'Managing Diversity'. This means that different policy levers will be anticipated, which move for example beyond the internal organisation to pay attention to outside barriers to recruitment or factors supporting discrimination. In addition, policies would move beyond purely individualistic interventions, to ones based around serving diverse constituencies/collectivities. This becomes particularly plain in the next section exploring the views of unions regarding the need to maintain a collective social group focus.

The problems associated with the lack of collective support

There are inherent dangers in emphasising individual difference, in that this could be used to reassert inferiority and justify exclusion (Webb, 1997). Indeed Webb uses a quote from Cockburn (1991) pointing out that there is little room for difference *not* to be constructed as something inferior, *"the dominant group know you are different and continue to treat you as different, but if you yourself specify your difference, your claim to equality will be null"* (1991: 219). Thus a diversity approach may give ammunition to those who feel that being 'different' to the dominant norm, disqualifies members of certain groups, allowing differences to be used in a way which is detrimental to equality (Liff, 1996). Individuals with 'diverse' experiences, thus become 'ghettoised' and exploited for the purposes of organisational gains (5) (Kaler, 2001: 63). Such approaches may also only serve to support the existing societal stereotyping. As Liff (1996) states, people may talk about women's skills of 'caring attitudes' but this does not explain why such skills continue to be devalued such that women are predominantly found at the bottom level of pay and status.

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5 For example, employing Asian workers for the sole purpose of capturing new markets.

Thus it is argued that a 'Managing Diversity' approach may paradoxically give ammunition to those who feel that being 'different' to the dominant norm, disqualifies members of certain groups from equal treatment, allowing differences to be used in a way which is detrimental to equality (Liff, 1997) and far from 'valuing diversity' (Kirton and Greene, 2000). Based on social group membership, people are not equally powerful and so the emphasis on the interests and differences of individuals, may only serve to maintain the power of the dominant groups (Liff, 1997). In contrast, reflecting on the individualistic strategies suggested by 'Managing Diversity', an officer related the common union strategy for dealing with individuals' problems and grievances as based around a collective approach:

"I think the biggest problem with the diversity idea is that it's individualised rather than collectivist. For example, if you take our organising strategy, you're trying to get people to identify issues that they can work towards together." (GPMU)

From a trade union perspective, an emphasis on differences between individuals weakens the ties that people have through common experience, that provide the necessary collective orientation to push for action, essentially leaving people alone and isolated in their struggle (Cockburn, 1989). Rather than being empowering and allowing each individual to make their contribution, the 'Managing Diversity' approach from this perspective is thus *disempowering*, dissolving collective identity and with it collective strength. One of the underlying principles of trade unionism is to give voice to those employees who are not able to represent themselves on an individual basis to management: why should individuals feel any more able to put forward their individual needs based on individual differences with regard to equality interventions?

Examples from our own empirical work indicate the collective purpose for which particular equality interventions are made (Kirton and Greene, 2002; Greene and Kirton, 2002). This is not to say that trade unions do not represent individuals; indeed individual casework comprises a large proportion of union representatives' duties, particularly in the present context of the diminishing role of collective bargaining. However, while unions are made up of a number of individuals, there is a collective aspect to this individual representation. As officers commented:

"it's all about collectivism isn't it, you know, if one person has that problem then that becomes a collective issue, hypothetically, you can bargain on it" (GMB)

'*…we've found in recent years that taking employment tribunals has been a very useful tool in equality, in saying to companies, 'look, what you're doing is unacceptable.' We've had to do that, we've had to focus more on the individual from an equal opportunities point of view to prove the point about a collective group."* (CWU)

The law in Britain prevents class actions on the basis of individual cases, however unions can still find space to negotiate collective agreements, drawing on the lessons of individual tribunal rulings or individual grievances. The officer from the CWU above related an example of a collective agreement on disability provision which emerged out of a successful individual tribunal ruling. In Dickens' (1997) ideal model of 'equal opportunities' practice, the role of trade unions for example is seen as a vital piece of the 'jigsaw' making up the campaign for equality in the workplace. Thus the important differentiation between 'diversity management' and that of 'Managing Diversity' is that there are often also collective dimensions and collective gains, which in the trade union context can be used to build solidarity, as seen in the 'policy' section of Figure 1.

It is clear that the heterogeneity of social groups and membership constituencies notwithstanding, interventions based around social groups offer crucial support and increased possibilities of change because collective orientations and consciousness are heightened. Recently there have been a number of writers who have criticised the treatment of social groups as homogenous within the trade union context, a criticism we would agree with. For instance, Colgan and Ledwith state that *'it is not realistic to see women as a single interest group'* (2000: 242), and stress the importance of recognising difference and divisions. However, within such a claim, their analysis continues nevertheless to illustrate the importance of collective gender consciousness, 'coalition politics' and 'joint strategies' amongst women across divisions in leading to change (2000: 256). Even within the most explicit call for an agenda that recognises diversity, Munro (2001) still points to the significance of collective agendas built around *groups* of disadvantaged members. Thus, the call is for a feminist trade union agenda that encompasses a diversity of interests: a recognition of 'diversity' but not of individualism. Indeed Munro states: *'what was missing …was any opportunity for the*

women to discuss their problems together and begin to articulate the implications of restructuring for them' (2001: 466). The importance of collective support in campaigning for equality with regard to the working class black women in her research is underlined, much as it has been in our own studies.

The 'strategy' and 'policy' elements of our 'diversity management' framework therefore would recognise conflicts, dilemmas and problems that may arise between different constituencies, and policy making would explicitly involve employees themselves, preferably through their representative bodies. Thus, our framework (Figure 1) pays attention to consulting, informing, negotiating and making policy jointly with stakeholder groups (including trade unions), therefore supporting a joint regulation approach to equality (Dickens, 1999).

Conclusions

As defined at the start, this paper has been concerned to debate the rhetoric rather than the practice of 'Managing Diversity' in unionised settings. Thus we have been interested in further conceptual developments and potential implications for policy and practice. The foregoing discussion has indicated the main conflicts and tensions from the perspective of trade unionists regarding 'Managing Diversity', which can be summarised as being: the individualistic rather than collectivist focus, and the primacy of the business case over the social justice case for equality, within rhetoric, strategy and policy.

Trade union activists and academics in the trade union arena in Britain have begun to talk about the value of 'diversity'. Indeed, there is evidence of internal policy interventions focused around 'difference'; examples of which include separate education courses, reserved seats, separate committees and other equality initiatives to provide the vehicles through which diverse social groups can construct their own agendas within the workplace and the union. However, within their 'difference' actions, unions also tend to argue for consistency of treatment of employees, believing this to be in the interests of fairness. Thus, 'sameness' and 'difference' approaches are both seen as appropriate strategies, albeit within different contexts and circumstances. While recognition of the heterogeneity of social groups is important, as well as the diversity of interests within social groups, the collective aspects of group membership are also seen as significant.

In addition, we have discussed the ways in which 'Managing Diversity' implicitly presupposes that equality already exists so that difference can be celebrated. However, employers have not eliminated inequalities to such an extent that it can now be appropriate to abandon 'equal opportunity' approaches in favour of a 'Managing Diversity' approach. In our view it is not appropriate to focus solely on the organisational benefits to be derived from diversity, unless and until equality of opportunity, condition and outcome (Miller, 1996) exist for all social groups.

This particular debate is not new, and fears of 'throwing the baby out with the bath water' have led to calls for approaches that build on existing equal opportunities interventions (Liff, 1999; Dickens, 1999; Cornelius, 2002). Indeed, looking at what little research exists of 'Managing Diversity' practice in Britain, many of the policies introduced resemble more traditional equal opportunities (Liff, 1999). In practice, social groups still appear very salient, despite the rhetoric. It is clear that organisations do not necessarily see a radical separation between equality and diversity approaches (Liff, 1999; Kirton, 2002: 7; Cornelius 2002b). Much of this overlap appears to occur because making policy on the basis of individual differences is very difficult in practice. Liff provides a good illustration of this looking at policies at BT, where she highlights the difficulties of having policy frameworks which simultaneously aim to ignore and respond to differences, because there is little understanding of the basis for deciding when it is appropriate to recognise differences and when to ignore them (1999: 73). Therefore, on one hand, 'Managing Diversity' may not really constitute a challenge to collectivised equality action, particularly as long as the unions continue to be involved in practice.

Does this then contradict our whole argument? We think not, because despite the practice, common models of 'Managing Diversity' still do not appear to explicitly include collectivised elements, do not emphasise employee involvement, and emphasise business case justifications to the exclusion of the social justice case. A cursory look at organisational statement on diversity attest to this (Kirton, 2002). Looking at the tensions and conflicts highlighted by the union officers we spoke to, the use of 'Managing Diversity' rhetoric could hide a more substantial intent to de-politicise and individualise equality policy, perhaps bypassing the unions. While Cornelius (2002: 1) claims that none of the managers she has spoken to felt that they needed to make a choice between 'Managing Diversity' or equal opportunities, our

study indicates that other stakeholders, such as trade unions do not necessarily see it that way and view the former as a significant threat to the latter. We argue that this view is not mistaken since social group membership still needs to be recognised as a fundamental contributing factor to patterns of disadvantage, rather than using de-politicised, gender and ethnic-neutral language. Thus we would view a collectivist strategy for 'diversity management' as more appropriate than an individualist one.

Research on this subject area is lacking in certain areas. We certainly know more about the rhetoric of 'Managing Diversity' than we know about its practice. In particular we know little about the involvement of different stakeholders in the development and practice of diversity policies. More research is necessary in order to assess a) whether the dangers and concerns of 'Managing Diversity' as raised by the trade union officers we spoke to, actually emerge more widely in the operationalisation of policy in Britain, and b) whether there is space for a more collectivised notion of 'diversity management' in practice. Part of the rationale for the construction of our framework was not only to establish intellectual and policy positions within a wider discussion of diversity rhetoric, and thus provide space for the trade union voice within the debate, but also to provide a framework for practitioners (such as trade union activists) engaging with 'Managing Diversity' interventions in organisational settings. We are interested in developing a new discourse of diversity, in which the collective implications of equality actions are considered and where trade unions (and conceivably other employee representatives) could be actively engaged with as agents within the diversity agenda. Thus, we identify a need and make a call for more research looking at the different ways in which employers in unionised contexts aim to 'manage' the diversity of their workforces, and the ways in which trade unions respond to such initiatives, assessing the utility and appropriateness of our framework (6).

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6 A contribution to this end is currently being embarked upon within IRRU funded by the European Social Fund http://users.wbs.warwick.ac.uk/group/irru/research/e24), and results and analysis are anticipated for 2005/6.

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