Clarissa Cortland & Felix Danbold

Understanding Diversity and Inclusion in the Workplace

Davide Ravasi: Welcome to Mind shift, a podcast from the UCL School of Management. I'm your host, Davide Ravasi. I'm the director of the school and I study change in organisations. I study why and how organisations change or do not change, and how culture, history, memory and identity affect these processes. Mind Shift aims to explore innovation in management, in conversation with members of the school's, diverse community of researchers.

We'll be peering through the lens of their research to get an insight into the rapidly shifting world of management and organisations.

Joining me today on this episode of the Mind Shift Podcast are Clarissa Cortland and Felix Danbold, both assistant professors in the organisation's and innovation group at the UCL School of Management. Clarissa and Felix both study issues around diversity, equity, and inclusion in organisations. But they approach these important issues from different perspectives so that they actually complement each other very well.

Clarissa's work focuses on the perspective and experiences of groups that tend to be underrepresented in certain industries and professions, as well as in leadership positions. Her research seeks to gain a better understanding of these experiences and to develop interventions aimed at improving diversity.

Felix also looks at diversity, equity, and inclusion within organisations. His research, however, tries to understand why some people are hesitant to embrace growing diversity and how we can leverage the psychology of shared identity to reduce resistance to diversity initiatives in the workplace. We will soon hear more about their research directly from Clarissa and Felix.

In this episode, we'll draw on the research to explore the challenges that organisations face in trying to create a diverse and inclusive workplace culture. We'll also discuss the impact of non-inclusivity on the success of an organisation as a whole.

Welcome both Claris and Felix and thanks for joining us on the Mind Shift podcast.

Felix Danbold: Thanks for having us.

Clarissa Cortland: Yeah, great to be here with you.

Davide Ravasi: Thank you. So why don't we start by explaining better what people mean when they talk about diversity and inclusion. It seems that many people may have different opinions about what a diverse organisation looks like in practice. Clarissa, why don't we start with you?

Clarissa Cortland: Sure. So, when we talk about diversity and inclusion, a diverse organisation is one in which there is a diverse representation in terms of protected characteristics such as age, race, ethnicity, gender, religion, these types of identities. And when I'm talking about diverse representation, of course, I mean not just at the lower levels of an organisation, but at all levels. And certainly including the upper echelons, the upper levels, and the C-suite of an organisation.

So for example, what I've seen a lot is that companies will boast about their diversity and boast about their numbers. And say, for example, we have great gender balance in our organisation, but then when you actually take a closer look, what you end up seeing is in a lot of organisations, an overrepresentation of women compared to men at the lower levels. And then as you get to the upper levels of an organisation, a stark underrepresentation of women compared to men. So, I would see that same company and say that this company has not achieved its diversity goals.

And then when we talk about inclusion and what inclusion means, where diversity is sort of synonymous with representation, inclusion I see is synonymous with belonging. So this is all about the employee's perceptions of and feelings of belonging at an organisation. The perception that their unique contribution to an organisation is fully appreciated, they're valued and they're respected at an organisation.

Diversity and inclusion, they really, really go together. You can't have one without the other. Diversity, without inclusion, it just won't last. You may have the numbers to begin with, but your employees won't stay. Nobody wants to stay at an organisation or in an industry where they don't feel valued or respected.

When you think about inclusion without diversity. in an organisation, you may run the risk of seeming disingenuous. If you have inclusion at the beginning, but you don't have the numbers, then this might look like you are not necessarily walking the talk in your organisation. So you really need both diversity and inclusion to be able to realise the long-term benefits of diversity.

Davide Ravasi: Thank you Clarissa. that was very clear. Felix, your researchers also looked at this question, right?

Felix Danbold: That's right. Yeah. I've done some work, uh, with Miguel Unzueta from UCLA Anderson, where we try to understand how people perceive diversity demographics. So, this is, even if we step back from the, uh, hierarchical dynamics that Clarissa was just talking about and try to understand how people make sense of, you know, the infographics that go around that show, this company is 25% women, this company is 35% women.

And what we find is that the way people perceive these diversity demographics is highly subjective and it's based on the groups they belong to. So, if we imagine an organisation that's trying to increase its representation of women, for example, we know that people will say, well, 0% women, that's not diverse, 50% women that is diverse.

We're interested in identifying where people draw the line in the middle, where an organisation tips over from being not diverse to diverse or diverse enough. What we find is that members of dominant groups, so it's those groups with the most access to power and resources in society. So, in terms of gender, men are typically the dominant group, um, and in terms of race and ethnicity in the United States where we ran this research, white Americans of the dominant group, members of those dominant groups who are faster to draw the diversity line, say we've achieved our diversity goals and diversity efforts are no longer needed, than members of non-dominant groups, the groups, uh, like women in ethnic minorities who diversity initiatives are often trying to help.

So, the difficult takeaway from that research is you could have a situation where two people are looking at the same set of numbers, but they're coming to conflicting conclusions about whether or not that organisation is diverse and whether or not more diversity initiatives are needed. And that conflict is rooted in the positioning of the groups these people belong to with dominant groups trying to preserve their status,

often majority status, and non-dominant groups trying to improve their status and increase their representation in organisation.

Davide Ravasi: So this is, it's very interesting because if I understand correctly, what the two of you're saying is that diversity is not just studying an objective property of an organisation. It's not just a matter of how objectively diverse the composition of the workforce is, but it's also a matter of perceptions of how diverse people feel the organisation to be, how they perceive it to be.

And this may change from person to person so that the very same organisation may be perceived as more diverse by someone and less diverse by others. So, when it comes to creating such a diverse organisation, what are the most common difficulties that the organisations encounter? Maybe we can start with Felix now.

Felix Danbold: Yeah, that's a great question and um, I can follow up on what I was just talking about in terms of the difference between dominant and non-dominant groups. So, the difference between men and women and white, uh, Americans or Britons and ethnic minorities in terms of their perceptions of diversity and what they think will happen as diversity increases.

So in some of my research, and this is with Yuen Huo, also from UCLA, we've tried to understand why it is that members of dominant groups often push back against growing diversity, or are at the very least hesitant to embrace growing diversity. And what we found is that, uh, there's a, a variety of explanations that we can, we can bring to bear for, explaining this resistance to diversity.

On the most intuitive level, I think we see a resistance to diversity coming around, fear of competition over jobs and resources, real material, uh, assets, uh, that members of dominant groups have, uh, long been able to take for granted as something that they have primary access to and diversity initiatives are trying to redistribute more equally.

But there's also tensions around identity. And our research really tries to focus on what these tensions are, these more intangible tensions. And what we found is that members of dominant groups push back against growing diversity because they worry about the loss of what scholars call prototypicality.

To be prototypical in a context, it means that your group gets to enjoy the standing of being the norm in that category. So, for example, take the professional domains of STEM science, technology, engineering, and math. Research has shown that people associate these professions with men more so than with women. When lay people and children are asked to draw a scientist, they typically draw a man.

And men entering those professions don't have to worry about whether or not they're gonna belong in those contexts, by virtue of their gender, in the same way that women do.

When diversity initiatives are present however, like gender diversity initiatives are present in stem, in, uh, many nations, that can lead members of dominant groups, like men, to worry that this prototypicality, the standing of being the norm and the default belonging that they enjoy from that, will be lost. That in the future they'll feel like strangers in their own land. And this fear of losing prototypicality is another driver of resistance to, uh, diversity initiatives. And it leads men in stem, for example, to, uh, oppose gender diversity initiatives and act in more chilling, unwelcoming ways to women entering those professions.

So, this reveals a real challenge for managers and their EDI efforts ,such that they can find pushback to their well-intentioned initiatives, driven by factors they may not readily anticipate. It's not just about competition over jobs and resources which may be addressed by expanding the pie and, and the gains that diversity brings.

It's about competition over identity, and that can be a trickier thing to navigate and anticipate. So, it's really important for managers and, uh, EDI leaders to anticipate and prepare for this kind of backlash and understand where it's coming from.

Davide Ravasi: We could probably argue that we see something similar at societal level as immigration is challenging the prototypical status of the traditional citizens of a country.

Felix Danbold: Absolutely. We, we have data showing the exact same processes, for example, with White Americans responding to change in demographics in the US and even White Britons responding to change in demographics here in the UK.

Davide Ravasi: Yeah, I'm not surprised. And Clarissa, if I understand correctly, your research looked more at it from the point of view of the nondominant, non-privileged.

What do we know about the perspective on this?

Clarissa Cortland: Their perspective and also the barriers that they face, right? So, when we think about the industries and the positions in our society that are most associated with money, with power, with status, with prestige, these are industries such as tech, finance, engineering, science, and maths, as well as leadership positions, broadly speaking, right?

What we tend to see over and over is that women and ethnic minorities. Are disproportionately underrepresented. And what this does is it creates the societal stereotype that women and minorities are less suited for these positions, or they have less ability to succeed in these professions. Um, and related to what Felix was saying about, um, prototypes, this sort of sets up this idea that the prototypical worker in some of these professions and industries is white or male and or male. And so because of these societal stereotypes that of course are very stubborn and sticky and hard to remove, women, underrepresented minorities often have to work under the constant threat of being judged or evaluated on the basis of these stereotypes.

Um, and what this can lead to, this constant threat in the workplace leads to this phenomenon that, um, I study a lot called stereotype threat. It's really linked to these negatively stereotyped identities. And the stereotypes that go with them in the workplace. And so, what decades of, uh, research on stereotype threat have found is that this constant threat of being judged on the basis of stereotypes, it causes employees to feel disengaged at work.

Um, it causes them to experience burnout and eventually it leads them to want to leave companies, leave whole industries, um, to places where they do feel more valued and respected and don't have to constantly navigate this threat in the workplace. And so, going back to what I said earlier about increasing representation and inclusion, the reason why we really want to sort of intervene and um, in this respect is because diversity and inclusion will disrupt the stereotype threat process.

What it does is, um, it dilutes the stereotypes, it weakens the connection between the stereotype and the negatively stereotyped identity in such a way that these things can then protect employees from threat.

Davide Ravasi: What you're saying is important because there's certainly an argument about inclusion and diversity as being morally, morally just goal in itself. But what you're telling us is there are also potentially negative repercussions for an organisation that is not diverse and inclusive.

So it's not just bad for people in a dominant position because it makes them feel less valued and it prevents them from accessing positions and occupations. But also, the organisation may suffer in the long term.

Shall we say something more about the risks that organisations incur or the costs of being non-diverse?

Clarissa Cortland: Absolutely. So just in addition to sort of these outcomes that you see, the consequences of stereotype threat, like I talked about, sort of disengagement, burnout, and exit from whole industries, the sort of downturn consequence of that then is that this sort of paves the way for future employees and especially underrepresented employees or people who like to see a more diverse culture and more inclusive culture in an organisation to then shy away from these particular companies and organisations. So, it really limits sort of the, the diverse pool that is potentially available to the organisation that the organisation can then take advantage of.

Davide Ravasi: And Felix, what are your thoughts on this?

Felix Danbold: Yeah, so another way of, uh, answering this question is to talk about what many people call the business case for diversity. So, we've been talking a lot about this social justice ethical case for diversity, improving the outcomes of members of non-dominant groups in society.

But a lot of businesses have been persuaded in recent years to pursue diversity because of the real gains they see in productivity and creativity. Uh, that's supported by decades and decades of research. Diversity when it's managed well, leads to a lot of better outcomes, better decision making for companies.

However, despite this influx of, uh, investments in, uh, EDI, a lot of companies still struggle to increase diversity in their ranks, and that's partly because of the reasons we've just been discussing. Members of non-dominant groups still not feeling welcomed in the workplace and leaving, and members of dominant groups pushing back against these efforts.

So, if companies really want to, uh, capitalize on diversity, and I think it's important to not just get stuck on the business case for diversity, to recognize the social benefits of this as well. They really need to pay attention to all the challenges that are wrapped up in it, and what a challenging task it is to really push back against centuries of inequalities and underrepresentation of certain groups in certain industries.

Davide Ravasi: Yeah, so, so striving for diversity, inclusivity because it's the right thing to do, but it's also good for the organisation itself, right? So going back to Clarissa then, what could organisations do to be more inclusive, more diverse.

Clarissa Cortland: Great question. This is why we're all here, right? So, the first step, of course, is to always to take a deep dive into your organisation's numbers.

The representation as it is and the culture, really take stock of what is currently going on, not just overall, but again, at each level of the company is really important. Look at your breakdown of your demographics, of your hiring and recruitment systems and processes. Pay, promotions, medical and parental leave, these kinds of things. Because only by taking this deep dive and getting a sense of where your organisation is, will you then be able to set the appropriate targets as far as your diversity goals.

So then you want to set up your targets and really track them openly and transparently and set up some accountability around these targets. Um, you really want to assign responsibility for achieving these goals. Once you've, I've set these targets and you start working on these targets, um, you really want to make your diverse representation visible because only by making it visible are you able to actually really unlock the benefits of diversity.

When you're able to improve your diversity, one thing you can do is to really highlight the success of some of your diverse employees at the

company. Because by doing this, you're able to get more visibility for, um, role models at your company.

And so some of my work that I've done in collaboration with my co-author, Zoe Kinias, shows that role models in organisations, they are a source of social supports in addition to things like supportive supervisors and supportive peer networks and things like that. Role models, people who look like you, who have visible signs of success at the company, have this really unique special effect on, um, underrepresented minorities at the company.

And, uh, that's because they really disrupt the negative cycle of stereotype threat for these employees at the company. Successful leaders, who sort of look like you, they provide highly visible examples, disproving the negative stereotypes that often threaten women and minorities work experiences. And this sort of helps these minorities to feel less burdened by this pressure to prove the stereotypes wrong.

They already have this visible example of someone who has done it, so the burden is lessened on your own shoulders to have to prove them wrong. And so, employees can focus on developing their careers and can feel encouraged to apply for higher positions within an organisation, that sort of thing.

So, role models are, uh, one of the interventions that have, um, been shown to be and demonstrated to be very, very important. And another thing that I just want to point out is when we talk about interventions creating an inclusive and diverse culture, unfortunately there is no one size fits all intervention, um, that we can talk about here.

So, uh, it's really important to investigate what support is needed at your particular company, in your particular culture, especially because it often depends on the specific organisational context. And this can often be achieved just by asking. So, for example, if we talk about women in context or organisations where they're underrepresented, and especially in leadership, some women may feel that they could benefit from attending workshops and seminars or resource group meetings specifically, um, geared toward their own career development and towards women's career development.

Other women may prefer something more behind the scenes, such as the opportunity to connect one-on-one with, um, other senior women at

the company. So it's really just important to ask and see what kind of support is needed.

Davide Ravasi: This is all very interesting, but, but it focuses on what managers can do to encourage diversity and inclusivity. But how can those not in a leadership position, contribute to a more diverse workplace, either from dominant or minority groups.

Clarissa Cortland: That's great. So, this is, uh, another really great question. And so Felix talked earlier about how there are some people who may actively resist diversity efforts due to identity threat. Like he, um, like he discussed. I sort of like to think about the people who make up an organisation as sort of three different types when it comes to supporters of diversity.

There are, there's a minority who may be your active resistors. There's again, a minority, hopefully not as much of a minority, but again, a minority who are active supporters of diversity. And there's sort of this big middle group who don't actively contribute to diversity efforts because they think it doesn't apply to them or to their interests.

Um, they have a lot of really important values and ideals and interests, um, apart from diversity that they're spending their time on, right? So, they're not necessarily, actively, um, participating in diversity. So, finding ways to reframe diversity efforts as being in everyone's interest then becomes really important.

And I've been really interested in this question of how to reframe diversity efforts to improve support for diversity. So, in some of my earlier work, I basically try to reframe. support for diversity efforts and support for other groups, um, who are affected by diversity efforts. But I look at this from the perspective of minority groups and minority, um, identities, and basically show that to the extent that minority employees can perceive that they share similar experiences with dealing with discrimination and stigma with other outgroup minority employees.

This sort of, shared similarity in their experiences can actually act as a lever in a way, to increase their support for other groups. So for example, when you think about ethnic minority employees supporting LGBTQ+ employees and vice versa.

So at baseline, maybe support between these two groups might not necessarily be very high. But then as you improve or increase the perceived similarity in the experiences between these two groups, you then, um, see increased support between these two groups. And what's really important here is that these similar experiences can then get these groups to align together to change the culture as a collective, um, which I think can be really powerful.

So as an organisation, having spaces where employees can gather and then share resources and support, can be a great way for people to connect and share these experiences that they perceive are similar, um, and then can lead to opportunities for them to gather in greater numbers to enact positive culture change in the organisation.

Um, and then another quick example of reframing diversity efforts, like I talked about. In another project that I have again with my collaborator, Zoe Kinias, we look at how highlighting the broader organisational and societal impact, that people care about and people value, can make them feel more motivated to become engaged in diversity efforts as well.

Davide Ravasi: So that tells us that the responsibility for making an organisation more diverse doesn't rest exclusively with organisational leadership or with senior managers, but everyone can be involved in making a workplace more diverse and more inclusive, right? So, you mentioned the beginning active resistors, which brings us back to Felix's research and how managers can handle these active resistors and these resistance to changes towards making workplaces more inclusive and, and more diverse.

Felix Danbold: Yeah, that's a great question and one I've tried to tackle in, uh, research as well. If one of the reasons members of dominant groups push back against growing diversity is they feel that there is competition over this prototypicality, who gets to represent us, who gets to represent our profession, for example?

Is there a way in which we can make that professional identity, that broader sense of who we are more inclusive?

That, that's the question I tried to answer with, uh, collaborator, Corinne Bendersky, uh, in the context of firefighting in the United States. Uh, we were really interested in this context because it's, uh, one that's struggled with issues of diversity, specifically gender diversity for decade

after decade after decade, despite a lot of great leaders and serious investments.

The representation of women in the fire service hasn't really budged from around 5%, 6% nationally, uh, for a very, very long time. And we tried to figure out why that's the case. And what we found was that what firefighters value in terms of what it means to be a firefighter, kind of what's rewarded and what's prioritized in the job, are often these stereotypically masculine characteristics around physical strength and decisiveness and assertiveness and stamina.

These sort of things that people do associate with firefighters. And it's this association between these stereotypically masculine traits, and the job of firefighting, that we think drives this prototypicality that men firefighters enjoy, right? People when they think of a firefighter, they typically think of a man. They have a harder time imagining a woman succeeding in the role. And women face this scepticism whenever they try and enter the fire service.

Is there a way we can make that prototype more inclusive? Well, we are pleased to hear that from our conversations with firefighters, that there are a lot of stereotypically feminine traits that are really important to the job as well.

What's surprising to many is that firefighters these days don't actually fight that many fires. Most of what they do is provide medical care to people in distress, and when you combine that with the fact that firefighters are often living with one another, supporting one another, and almost serving as second families for one another, a lot of stereotypically feminine traits around compassion, empathy, warmth, patience, et cetera, are really, really vital to the job.

They're just downplayed in importance relative to the stereotypically masculine traits. So, we developed an intervention where we reminded professional firefighters of the importance of these more stereotypically feminine traits. And what we found was that we could get them to think about these traits as equally important as a stereotypically masculine one.

And what that did is it removed this association between masculinity and success in the fire service, such that we saw a decrease in bias against women firefighters and in more recent follow up work, a decrease in

support for gender exclusionary supervisors, those who would continue to promote the belief that firefighting is a man's job.

Davide Ravasi: Which brings us back to where we start. The idea that diversity and inclusivity is a matter of perceptions. And in this case, what you're telling us is that, and also what Clarissa told us earlier is that, managing diversity, managing towards diversity, is really about managing perceptions and self-perceptions.

Felix Danbold: Absolutely.

Davide Ravasi: I would say that as director of the school, I'm very proud that we contribute in this way through your research to addressing such a crucial issue for organisations and society more generally. Now we are in a conclusion of our episode today, and I wonder if you have one last word for managers that generally wish to improve diversity and inclusivity in their organisations.

Clarissa Cortland: So I guess to sum up, it's really important for organisations to, first of all acknowledge the understanding that being underrepresented comes with challenges that are unrelated to employees skillset or competence level. So, one way that organisations can signal that they know this and they understand, um, is to create safe spaces for underrepresented employees to gather and share support and resources.

Um, this can look like providing organisational support for employee resource groups, um, as well as providing formal or informal opportunities for junior employees to connect with more senior employees. So in addition to communicating to employees that their unique perspective, skillset, and contributions are valued at the company, these kinds of efforts can help to normalize the discussion around identity and EDI issues, as opposed to further stigmatizing these topics.

Davide Ravasi: Thank you. And Felix, any last things to add?

Felix Danbold: So the last thing I'd like to talk about is just how you can apply these insights from this work with firefighting to your organisation or to kind of broader professions. I think that the way that prototypes get perpetuated in organisations and the way that certain groups are, uh,

privileged in terms of their prototypicality, it comes about through very common practices of promotion, hiring, and evaluation.

What are the features, the traits of employees that you routinely reward and prioritise? What do you communicate to your workers is really important on the job? If you take stock of this and you realise that what you're telling your employees really matters are things like assertiveness, decisiveness, stereotypically masculine traits or, traits that are associated with people who are high SES or white people in your organisation, then you shouldn't be surprised that those people are the ones who get ahead most easily.

What you should do is see if there's a way in which you can balance or make more inclusive the set of traits that you reward and value among your employees as a way to do away with these unfair and often disadvantageous associations between certain groups and success within your company.

Davide Ravasi: Thank you Felix, and thank you Clarissa. Thank you both for being with us today and telling us more about your research on diversity, equality, and inclusivity in organisations. And good luck. Good luck with your future research projects.

Felix Danbold: Thank you.

Clarissa Cortland: Thanks.

Davide Ravasi: You've been listening to Mind Shift, a podcast from the UCL School of Management.

I was your host, Davide Ravasi, director of the school. If you can't wait for the next episode, why not revisit series one? While you're there, you can leave us a review to help us reach more listeners and we'd love to hear what you think.

We'll be back soon with another conversation about innovation management and organisations, with more fascinating researchers from the UCL School of Management.

Until next time, thank you for listening to the Mind Shift podcast and bye for now.