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# CRITICAL DIVERSITY LITERACY: DIVERSITY AWARENESS IN TWELVE SOUTH AFRICAN ORGANISATIONS<sup>1</sup>.

Melissa Steyn<sup>2</sup>

## Abstract

South African society has undergone a remarkable political and legal transformation since 1994, moving from apartheid towards a democratic society which enshrines the rights of diversity. However, deep social divisions and inequalities persist. Twelve case studies were conducted as part of the DEISA research programme into diversity and equity transformation in South African organisations. The concept of *Critical Diversity Literacy* (CDL) was useful to judge the organisations for their disposition towards diversity, and the extent of their achieved transformation. The CDL model proposed here is a conceptual tool for teaching and implementing transformation towards more socially just approaches to workplace diversity, even in complex postcolonial contexts.

## Introduction

With the pressures of rapidly changing internal demographics within national states, as well as the ever-accelerating interconnectedness of communities across the globe, there is an enormous thrust to theorise questions of diversity, co-existence and identity, not only in order to

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formulate sound progressive policy and practice, but because engaging issues of difference in mutually affirming ways is necessary if we are to have a future together on the planet (Adler, 1997; Bauman, 2004; Essed, 2002; Mindell, 1995; O'Hara-Devereaux, 1994; (Senge, 2000; Sen, 2006). International thinking on human rights increasingly recognises diversity as a human rights issue, as can be seen explicitly stated in documents such as the Declaration of the World Conference against Racism held in Durban, South Africa (World Conference against Racism, 2001). South African society has seen a remarkable political and legal transformation in the past fifteen years, moving from institutionalised apartheid towards a democratic society which enshrines the rights of its people in all their diversity. The South African Constitution (1996) prohibits all forms of unfair discrimination based on criteria such as race, gender, sexual orientation and other grounds, and the Equality Act (2000) recognises the promotion of diversity as a fair reason for "positive" discrimination such as in Affirmative Action. The Constitutional Court Judge, Pius Langa (2007), has indeed found that:

The acknowledgment and acceptance of difference is particularly important in our country where for centuries group membership based on supposed biological characteristics such as skin colour has been the express basis of advantage and disadvantage. South Africans come in all shapes and sizes. The development of an active rather than a purely formal sense of enjoying a common citizenship depends on recognising and accepting people with all their differences, as they are. The Constitution thus acknowledges the variability of human beings (genetic and socio-cultural), affirms the right to be different, and celebrates the diversity of the nation. (Constitutional Court Judgment, CCT 51/06, 2007)

Widespread reform has taken place in the labour sector since 1994. The government has introduced new legislation affecting labour relations, basic conditions of employment, and employment equity, thus providing the basis for far-reaching changes in South African employment practices. The Commission for Conciliation, Mediation and Arbitration, the Labour Court, as well as other structures set up to monitor labour standards provide the means for unfair labour practices to be challenged and rectified. A significant piece of legislation which has changed the labour landscape in South Africa is the Employment Equity Act (1998).

This requires every employer to promote equal opportunity in the workplace by eliminating unfair discrimination from any employment policy or practice and to demonstrate progress in diversifying the workplace in such a way that previously excluded groups are fully represented, and promoted. Yet the profile of senior positions remains overwhelmingly white and male, and progress remains very slow (Commission for Employment Equity, 2006; Booysen, 2007). Similarly, the National Skills Development Strategy sets out a vision for skills development that has "the promotion of equity" prioritised as one of six central goals. Skills development is one way in which equity can be achieved, and through the Skills Development Act (1998) and the Skills Development Levies Act (1999), the government is compelling organisations to widen opportunities, build equity and encourage collaboration to make this happen. Black Economic Empowerment measures, and more recently, Broad Based Black Economic Empowerment legislation (2003) also seeks to change the complexion of ownership of companies to reflect the demographics of the nation.

On the ground, however, South African society is a long way from embodying the progressive legislation in everyday practices and approaches. Deep social divisions and inequalities persist, perpetuated along the fault lines created by the past colonial and apartheid ideological commitments, within the context of a region grappling with conflict, political upheaval and poverty at the same time that it opens up to the pressures and opportunities of globalization; the diversity of the population more often than not is regarded as a source of difficulty and unequal access and opportunities persist (Grunebaum & Robins; Makgoba, 1998; Steyn, 2003; Zegeye, 2001; Ansell, 2001; Franchi, 2003; Booysen, 2007; Commission for Employment Equity, 2006). It has become a commonplace to observe that while one can change laws one cannot legislate the hearts and minds of citizens. To develop an ethos in which ordinary people develop the requisite understandings, approaches and skills to bring about transformation of the various sectors of society, they themselves have to undertake the learning and educate themselves about how oppression functioned in the history of the country, how ordinary people participated, and continue to participate, in perpetuating oppressive systems, and how individuals can make a contribution towards greater social justice within their sphere of influence. They have to become literate to the issues of oppression and discrimination in all guises, become intolerant of injustice in the status quo, and come to

care about creating a more equitable present and future. In short, they need to become “literate” in issues of diversity. This is especially true for those who hold positional power, such people in management positions. These are the people who are responsible for driving change in their organizations--a generally held view, almost to the point of a truism, is that transformation is only successful when there is executive and management commitment for the change processes.

This article does not set out to argue the need for diversity or inclusionary practices in organizations, as this is a separate issue and is well documented and debated in the literature (Loden M. &, 1991; Thomas & Ely, 1996; Collins, 1996; Litvin, 2006). Drawing on data from a research programme into Diversity and Equity Interventions in South Africa (DEISA) which examines the diversity “industry” in South Africa, I will rather examine transformation in South African organisations through the conceptual model I am proposing, namely, *Critical Diversity Literacy*.

### **Critical Diversity Theory**

The notion of *Critical Diversity Literacy* can be located within a paradigm that can be called Critical Diversity Theory. This approach to diversity draws on the theoretical tradition originally emanating from the Frankfurt School (Carr 2000) , and is therefore aligned with Critical Management/Organizational Studies (Lorbiecki & Jack, 2000; Litvin, 2006; Kersten, 2000; Collins, 1996; Deetz, 1997), particularly those studies which are informed by post-structuralist and postcolonial insights (Fischer & Van Vianen, 2004; Grimes, 2001; Macapline & Marsh, 2005; Prasad, 2006). It focuses on multiple axes of difference where power dynamics operate to create the centres and margins of gender, race, ability, sexual orientation, age etc. as well as their varying intersections. It also acknowledges the centuries of colonial history and ideologies of Western/European (white) superiority and African/Asian (black) inferiority (Kelly, Wale, Soudien, & Steyn 2007). Such an orientation entails a radical look at the constructions of difference which underpin institutional culture and interpersonal interactions, and moves beyond merely tolerating, or assimilating, differences into dominant practices, which is the case for some approaches to diversity (Kersten, 2000; Litvin, 2006; Prasad, 2006; Steyn, Soudien, Essed, Nkomo, Booyesen, & April, 2003) .

The strength of this position is that it does not present itself as value-free, aligning with the now well-established argument in feminist, anti-racist, postcolonial and other emancipator scholarship, that that no research ever is value neutral, but that scholarship that claims value neutrality inevitably reproduces dominant ideologies. Rather, the research declares its social agenda up front. In brief, this particular stance towards diversity

- departs from a profound commitment to the values of democracy, social justice, equity and empowerment;
- recognises that the incorporation of people that have been marginalised should not involve a process of assimilation, but a transformation of the cultural milieu in order to bring about new social meanings and representations;
- rejects essentialised notions of identity, naturalised notions of race, gender etc, and discourses which reify homogeneity;
- stresses that identity and difference are constructed within specific historical, cultural and power relations. (Carr, 2000; Giroux, 1997; Goldberg, 1994; Steyn, Soudien, Essed, Nkomo, Booyesen, & April, 2003;).

By these criteria, a Critical Diversity approach is recognised by its effectiveness in increasing democratic and equitable modes of organisation (Brah, 1992; Brah, 1992; Adams, Blumenfeld, Castenada, Hackman, & Peters, 1997; Deetz, 1997; Delgado & Stefancic, 1997; Giroux, 1997; Thomas & Ely, 1996; Zack, Shrage, & Sartwell, 1998). It provides a distinction between difference management which encourages window-dressing, and that which aims at profound transformation, at the level of deep structure and values (Bonnett, 2000; Essed, 2002; Ismail, 2002; Kincheloe, Steinberg, Rodriguez, & Chennault, 1998; Mandaza, 1999).

### **Critical Diversity Literacy**

This paper proposes a conceptual tool, *Critical Diversity Literacy*,<sup>i</sup> to express presence (or lack) of Critical Diversity approach. It can be defined as follows:

*“Diversity literacy” can best be characterized as a “reading practice”—a way of perceiving and responding to the social climate and prevalent structures of oppression. The analytical criteria employed to evaluate the presence of diversity literacy include the following: 1) a recognition*

*of the symbolic and material value of hegemonic identities, such as whiteness, heterosexuality, masculinity, ablebodiedness, middleclassness etc.; 2) analytic skill at unpacking how these systems of oppression intersect, interlock, co-construct and constitute each other; 3) the definition of oppressive systems such as racism as current social problems rather than a historical legacy; 4) an understanding that social identities are learned and an outcome of social practices; 5) the possession of a diversity grammar and a vocabulary that facilitates a discussion of race, racism, and antiracism, and the parallel concepts employed in the analysis of other forms of oppression; 6) the ability to translate (interpret) coded hegemonic practices; 7) an analysis of the ways that diversity hierarchies and institutionalised oppressions are mediated by class inequality and inflected in specific social contexts; and 8) an engagement with issues of transformation of these oppressive systems towards deepening democracy/social justice in all levels of social organisation. (Steyn M. , 2007).*

The concept of Critical Diversity Literacy was found useful to judge the organisations studied in the DEISA research programme for their disposition towards diversity, and the extent of achieved transformation as indicated by how respectful of difference the people working in the organisations experience them to be.

### *The DEISA project*

DEISA (Diversity and Equity Interventions in South Africa ) is a research programme which studies the transformation “industry” in South Africa. It explores issues such as the kinds of interventions being undertaken under the rubric of Diversity and Equity, how these are experienced by people working in the organizations, the impact of these interventions, the theoretical frameworks used by practitioners, and especially, how interventions may or may not articulate with the quest for social justice in a democratising South Africa. While the programme is based at INCUDISA at the University of Cape Town<sup>ii</sup>, the research team is interdisciplinary and interinstitutional, including researchers from the School for Business Leadership at UNISA<sup>iii</sup>, and the Netherlands and the United States<sup>iv</sup>. The project was funded by the South African-Netherlands Partnership for Alternatives in Development (SANPAD), and the South African National Research Foundation.

Twelve case studies of organizations were undertaken, mostly in the two major hubs of the South African economy, Gauteng and Cape Town.

Two studies were in other regions of the country. The case studies that fell under the private sector were: Small Food Production Company (SFPC); Small Clothing Manufacturer (SCM); Retail Company (RC); Financial Services Company (FSC); Large Industrial Company (LIC); a Commercial Organisation (CO) and a Large South African Manufacturer (LSAM). The public/state work environments studied were: a state-owned financial institution (FI); a local government department (LGD); a higher-learning institution (IHL); a South African Police Service station (SAPS); a large commercialised resources state-owned enterprise ('Sekupu').<sup>v</sup>

The main focus of the studies was the nature and effectiveness of the broad spectrum of interventions had been carried out in these organisations under the rubric of diversity. The case studies attempted to assess the degree to which the members of the organisation felt a palpable difference had occurred subsequent to the intervention in how the organisation approached their differences. They were conducted by students in the MPhil Programme in Diversity Studies (UCT) and the MBA Programme (UNISA) under supervision of the senior researchers. These students underwent training in the theory of Critical Diversity Studies and in the methodologies they would need to employ. They were given a general template for the final report in order to ensure comparability of the results.

Analyses of the main findings of the DEISA project are presented in other publications (Booyesen, Kelly, Nkomo, & Steyn 2007; Faull 2008; Kelly, Wale, Soudien, & Steyn; Van Aswegen 2008). For the purposes of this article, however, the interview data across the case studies were re-analysed specifically to assess interviewee comments about how they experience the way their organization approaches questions of diversity. The eight criteria of CDL given above were used to categorise comments which were then analysed using discourse analysis . (Parker, 1994; 2005).<sup>vi</sup> While CDL is clearly a skill set applied to the individual, this paper proposes that the concept can be used reflect on the complexity and success of an organization's engagement with diversity. The next section of this article analyses CDL in the organizations studies by DEISA, according to each of the criteria. The purpose is not to compare the companies, but rather to illustrate the ways in which the presence—or absence—of CDL is revealed through the way in which employees talk, and can be demonstrated to be prevalent across the organizations and by implication in South Africa, generally. Because

there was no evidence of CDL in relation to other axes of difference such as ablebodiedness, heteronormativity, nationality and such like in the data. The analysis therefore will focus race and gender, which were uppermost in the minds of the interviewees. The absence of discourse on the other dimensions of diversity indicates how little awareness there is of how entrenched the norms are, resulting in virtual invisibility of any contestation of identity (Nkomo & Stewart, 2006; Steyn & Van Zyl, 2009).

### **Unpacking Critical Diversity Literacy (CDL) in the organisations**

- (a) Recognition of the symbolic and material value of hegemonic identities, such as whiteness, heterosexuality, masculinity, ablebodiedness, middleclassness etc.

In the organisations studied, it was clear that hegemonic identities in relation to race, and to a lesser extent, gender, were experiencing a measure of existential crisis, given the changes taking place in the workplace as a result of legislation and the ensuing greater degree of diversity. This was particularly evident amongst white males, who interpreted the incursion of black people and white women into their “territories” as victimization and unfair “reverse” discrimination:

How long will the fact that I am white count against me? Discrimination [against whites] continues in spite of the new constitution. (White male senior lecturer - )

Yet, interview after interview showed the power of both whiteness and masculinity were clearly being reproduced in all the organisations. From the stories told, one can recognise the ease with which these hegemonies continued to dictate the terms of engagement and dominate the organisational cultures. Those in positions of whiteness and maleness experienced a freedom to regard themselves as “normal,” the standard to which others must aspire and be brought up to speed. The lack of diversity literacy is often revealed by defensiveness of hegemonic privileged positions in the face of the “attack” of transformation, such as the women who felt that they had to “defend the white race” in diversity workshops. The hegemonies also play themselves out in more subtle

ways, such as in traces of colonial discourse that sees the task of white people to “uplift” others to the level of the “norm,” even when quite genuinely committed to bringing about change in the workplace:

The troubles and problems of before were more targeted at the African people, they are the ones that have to be uplifted by this, so they must actually give us comment on how the guys have been doing. I personally have seen a remarkable change in all my colleagues from old to young, people are accepting African people and socialising with them, they are understanding, sometimes they don’t agree, but I mean people are like that, but I have seen a great improvement. (CO)

In this curious mixture of more, or less, conscious wielding of “soft power” (Prasad, 2006). It is clear that those in hegemonic positions show very little awareness of how much they are taking for granted, and to what extent they are privileged by the system. It is those who are on the “other” side of the hegemonic axes, the ones who are likely to be disadvantaged, insulted, or treated unjustly by the normative arrangements, who “read” the advantage and recognise the actions of privilege:

A casual conversation with a coloured, female supervisor revealed that women must have “strong character”, “prove” themselves and “show” what they can do at [SFPC]. Put differently, women need to be masculine in order to succeed in a culture that does not value the feminine. This undervaluing has tangible consequences, the first being around temporary and permanent positions. Some women floor workers believe that men are favoured over women in the granting of permanent positions “Mansmense word meerder permanent gemaak as wat vroumense permanent gemaak word.” [Trsl: Men are more often made permanent than women are] (Claire Kelly, citing a Floor worker – Coloured woman)

The following interviewee explains how she has learnt to curb her creativity and minimise her input at her workplace because of unchecked racist comments at a workshop where white views, interests and concerns were able to dominate:

But on some things that were said, they also had a negative impact on other people like myself for example, uhm the fact that

uhm the fact that black people learn slow, that they are not as competent, I have to be honest it haunted me for about four months, because there were situations where I could give my input by showing initiative, you know in the work environment you don't only do what you are told to do—you can foresee this will be a problem tomorrow—let me be creative and solve it now. But you know living with that feeling that I'm not as creative as other people, you know it, you know it really gets you into a situation where you do what your expected to do, you don't see the importance to show initiative....I even discussed it with other people, this workshop brought some negativity because I really felt very bad after that. It was just an attack, a way of attacking other races. It shows a lack of respect to other people, I remember another remark, I would not say who made that remark, but he said he said 'these people, these people cannot file flight plans because they are [only] capable of cutting wood. (CO)

Another interviewee comments on the difficulty those who are accustomed to having positions of authority, and for whom being in charge over others is part of their identity, have in adjusting to the "abnormal" situation of being subordinated to those they believe are "supposed" to be their inferiors:

Sometimes some of these males develop an issue because they have to listen to a female manager and in other instances it appears that these males do not always know how to react to these situations where I am the senior to make the decision. (CO)

Women in focus groups expressed the view that that felt that they were not sufficiently respected, and that diversity training did not always significantly address the development of CDL in relation to gender during workshops. There is evidence that non-hegemonic groups often simply resign themselves to the inevitability of the ongoing dynamics, even when they carry costs to themselves, if passivity ensures their continuing employment:

Every second guy is acting in a sexual harassment manner to other people. "Hey you've got *lekker* bums" and all that. You see, so that will be there always. No matter how you try and control it. (LSAM)

- (b) Analytic skill at unpacking how these systems of oppression intersect, interlock, co-construct and constitute each other

*Generally, there is no doubt that when people think of diversity in South African organisations, they focus on race. Mostly, too, the respondents in the studies talked about diversity issues in terms of single dimensions, without expressing a sense of how oppressions intersect or depend on each other for their power. An important exception is the intersection of whiteness and masculinity, which others certainly recognised as being a doubly advantaged position, where whiteness and masculinity enhance each other's power. As one woman put it, power resides with "Persons that are from the old school and in management positions."* (LIC)

Other intersections became more apparent to the respondents when the alignments that hold hegemonies in advantaged positions start to unravel. A case in point is that of working class masculinity. With the introduction of the new legislation the class status may pull against expectations of the hegemonic gender order as women are now able to advance to the managerial classes previously monopolised by men:

Yes everybody is not happy...because the wife is bringing now the same salary or even more than your salary. My wife is working and she earns more than me then she says to me I am going to town and I will be late. Now we don't feel that it is ok for our wives to speak to us like that. Now because of equity my wife can tell you something. Yes the guys are feeling the pain and that is very bad as I told you about those ladies that are working here those ladies are top managers. And maybe these ladies are married and she brings R23 000 from work on her salary monthly and maybe I bring R6 000. Money speaks, so she is the best. (RC)

*The discomfort is "read" by the women who occupy these positions within the "reversed" gender order:*

Sometimes some of these males develop an issue because they have to listen to a female manager and in other instances it appears that these males do not always know how to react to these situations where I am the senior to make the decision. (CO)

In the retail company, some of the respondents commented on the interlocking marginalizing effects of racism and HIV-AIDS stigma, commenting how other racial groups perceive this is be 'black disease' and an 'African problem,' as a way of denying their own vulnerability and/or infection, and also keeping their position elevated above "them." The social construction of AIDS thus becomes another way in which racism can operate.

I just feel that where issues of HIV are concerned, especially with coloured people it is going to gain momentum, because we have this perception that HIV is only associated with black people. As I've heard in situations, some people have, because of their religion have been told to keep it a secret. And people keep it a secret. So I think that the Peer Educators should expand to the coloureds as well (RC)

- (c) The definition of oppressive systems such as racism as current social problems rather than a historical legacy

A very noticeable trend is that it is the people who experience the effects of racism and sexism that are most of aware of how it continues in workplace, and of forms it takes. For them, struggles are ongoing:

There are policies that address diversity and there have been opportunities as a result of these policies. However, the playing fields are still not even. (LIC)

A number of people spoke about the personal price paid by those who challenge the powerful normative positions:

I think victimisation is still a reality, I have seen victimisation, it's not just a fear within. And to solve this who do you go and speak to, cause the other manager is friends with the one that is victimising you....and they talk to each other. To whom do you go?. We need someone who can mediate, that someone impartial, somebody that's impartial. (CO)

Other people talked about the ways in which discriminatory dynamics are perpetuated through a lack of willingness to act against those who perpetuate them:

Interviewee: I know that the one guy signed a warning for sexual harassment that works in the X department.

Researcher: Do you think that they are dealing with it effectively?

Interviewee: No.

Researcher: Why not?

Interviewee: He's still there!

(LSAM)

Evasion of present oppression went hand in hand with denial of the enduring forms of racism and sexism, most often amongst dominant positionalities. People who raise such questions are often seen as troublemakers, or wanting special excuses for incompetence:

That's the sort of stuff that one always has in these big factory environments, is that you're going to have people who just, just want to stir trouble for the sake of stirring trouble. But as I say, there is a younger set coming in and a group which is not so jaded by the past of the country... I don't want to get into the whole political thing. I want to look at things from "who can do the job, who can't do the job and who wants to do the job?" And not just for the sake of, you know, shame, they're previously disadvantaged. I'm going to have to make an exception. (Sekupu)

*At the same time, comment after comment made by white people reveals the virulence of racism, uttered without any sense of how much more they are revealing about themselves than those that they construct as the 'problem.'*

I don't know if it is a thing of how they were brought up. It's definitely a thing that stands out...let's take an example, say you have a fault on a technical line then the specific races will take a bit longer, not necessarily always, but especially the first time they are known to take longer... to get to the bottom of the problem... then the black will struggle a lot but the white guy will say okay – he will click much quicker – I don't say he will click immediately but he will click quicker, where the black will say 'Yoh! What is this here?' (LSAM)

Similar tendencies to perpetuate taken-for-granted "facts" about the nature/abilities of women abound. A junior manager in an engineering firm put it:

There is some stuff that a female cannot do that a male can do like the big hoses for example... My personal point is that I would rather have males because of the physical work involved and most females cannot cope. I have a woman who is like a brick and a tiekie high. What is she going to do as far as physical work?" (LSAM junior manager).

Yet a woman engineer in the same site reported that most of the work for professional engineers entailed reading meters and flicking switches! *Particularly problematic from the perspective of CDL is that privileged groups, rather than examining the ongoing effects of racial and gender privilege, are more likely to construct racism and sexism as problems that are not only past, but actually now "reversed." This makes a more complex analysis of how legacies of colonial and apartheid interact in complex ways with the attempts at redress difficult:*

They're saying "we're trying to fix the numbers"...Yes I hear that being spoken of, yes. Look I understand that all people should be given a chance and I have no problem with that. I also feel – look I don't mind people being given a fair chance, that's good, I have been in my job for 10 – 13 years, you sit and do the same job for a long time. That's the only thing that catches me – it's now like I've been put in the corner...I just feel, you know, there's no opportunity. (LSAM shop floor employee)

*The tendency for white people, especially white men, to see themselves as the victim of unfair politics where policies such as Affirmative Action are practiced, is fairly widespread, and is recognised by scholars as deflecting attention away from ongoing economic inequalities (Gallagher, 2008).*

- (d) An understanding that social identities are learned and an outcome of social practices

*The tendency to essentialise race and gender is highly prevalent in the discourse within all the organisations studied. People are attributed characteristics merely by virtue of their assumed race, with little appreciation of the social and contextual processes that bring people to particular understandings of themselves and their environments. Black people, especially, were aware of how they were being stereotyped, especially in the context of Affirmative Action which is often regarded merely as tokenism:*

I would like people to know that I have the content and character to do the job--not because I am black. (IHL)

Sometimes I am seen as a black face and not as an academic and because of that, 'we can use her.' (IHL)

*It was striking that processes of cultural essentialising often operated even when there was an apparent recognition social influences in shaping people's sense of self. In the following quotation the attribution of a "pathological culture" (Bonilla-Silva & Baiocchi, 2008) provided explanation the purported lack of financial planning in the black workforce. Many other possible explanations are ignored, such as the economic demands of a large extended family.*

This is not all non-white people okay, and I don't mean anything okay this is a fact, but because of the lifestyle and the culture and the way they grow up, it's not important, as long as they have a job that's important, so long as they have money in their pocket that's the short term benefits, it's more important than the longer

term and I don't know how to bridge that gap to make, to make some of them see further. (SFPC)

At the same time, there were indications of shifts in perception as more nuanced and differentiated understandings were developed through diversity interventions:

Before I had this perception that I grew up with about white people, always I knew they are bad people but it made me realise people are different and there are stereotypes out there but we are to deal with the situation. (SFPC)

*In line with tendencies elsewhere, the respondents in these studies tended to minimise the social and systemic levels of the dynamics of exclusion and marginalisation by personalising, or psychologising, the issues so that change depends on the individual, rather than broad-based reform ( Steyn, Soudien, Essed, Nkomo, Booysen, & April, 2003).*

Those members who elaborated on these points, including the Area HRM, Supt Stirk, almost always returned to the view that diversity issues are very personal and that in the end it is up to an individual to change themselves (Andrew Faull - SAPS)

- (e) The possession of a diversity grammar and a vocabulary that facilitates a discussion of race, racism, and antiracism, and the parallel concepts employed in the analysis of other forms of oppression

The general difficulty in finding a language to talk about race, racism and other oppressions was readily apparent in the interviews. A common complaint from black interviewees was that white colleagues assumed to have the right to define them, and did not recognise the limitations of their knowledge, which is often conditioned by the racially skewed past. One black female junior lecturer explains that she has difficulty with:

The groups who think they know everything. Because I am black it's accepted that I don't know. . . . They've got their own

perception, they think they know us, think they know too much. It's all about my colour. It's difficult with white groups. (Black female junior lecturer - IHL)

Another young lecturer concurs:

White people talk to you as if you're not used to anything and know nothing. (Coloured female senior lecturer - IHL)

Researchers reported a similar lack of grasp into concepts such as sexual harassment. In one study, two cases of sexual harassment had been reported. However, the researcher commented:

The manner in which the captain talked about the two cases was rather disconcerting in that he dismissed both as not being "real" sexual harassment Andrew Faull- SAPS

Lack of self-awareness, as well as lack of recognition of how limiting assumptions about the Other permeate the workplace, closes down the possibilities for genuine dialogue in raced and gendered contexts. The levels of grievance about transformation in the workplace make any discussion of diversity extremely fraught. The lines of victimisation and disadvantage become crossed, especially when the commitment to non-racialism and non-sexism of the South African constitution becomes recast in terms of colour-and gender- blindness, forms of evasion of enduring power inequalities. The following employee casts transformation as illegitimate and hasty, deflecting the discussion of racial and cultural domination of the institution, and putting the attempts to name and address race, racism and anti-racism on the defensive. A salient feature of the environments depicted in the case studies is the high levels of anxiety prevalent in relation to talking about questions of race. One white female senior lecturer, for example, mentions how "On the surface everything is friendly and kind but I can feel underlying tension" (IHL). Another said that "It feels as if I am in the middle of the Red Sea that can close at any time" (IHL). Respondents feel uncertain, helpless, frustrated and see no progress. Trust levels are very low.

It is difficult to see how the necessary conceptual tools for dialogue on these topics can be developed in cultures of such defensiveness. One

person describes how even in diversity workshops, people are reticent, and hesitate to engage:

Resistance to participate, people even even with the focus group trying to get people just to take part, they always think hey that I can't, maybe I'm going to be put in a position where I will be focused on or looked at or penalized. They don't want to really say I have taken part in a specific project. (CO)

Another tells of her reluctance to “come out” on the racial and gender tensions she senses:

If I speak my mind I'm going to get into trouble I'm going to become a marked person.” (Admin staff-SFPC)

It would appear that it is difficult to move the conversation beyond simple questions of Employment Equity, rather than venture into the more complex and challenging issues of organisational cultures, personal attitudes, ideologies, and structural/systemic injustices. People just don't want to “go there.”

This is one of our standard agenda topics in our weekly meetings, we try address this on a continuous basis and uhm we talk quite a lot about the diversity in the work environment and also try to get feedback. But the staff still seem to not share their views and opinions openly, uhm its as if they still hold back quite a bit on diversity....We had an incident the other day when a black guy, one of our assistants which is at the lower level of skill and competence he uhm, his son died and the funeral arrangements...and it came forward, you know people don't want to talk about it, as if it's a secret. It's a funny experience I had, that people don't want to share how they operate in such a sad situation. (CO)

*The trend seems to be that difficult issues get folded into other topics, rather than addressed directly, thus maintaining strategic silences and allowing the existing dynamics to roll over. This changes when open conflict makes it impossible to ignore diversity issues, yet even then*

*there is a tendency to reframe racial content in “neutral” terms in order to make things less explosive:*

The training is on a voluntary basis and originates from conflict situations, so management sees it as a conflict management intervention. That conflict is usually along race lines. Training is reactive not proactive. (IHL)

A characteristic of some of the organisations studied is the tendency for racial tension to be defused by way of humour. The members of the South African Police service, for example, reported how:

Sometimes [we joke] but this is not in a bad way...one of them [white members] will come in and say, ‘Yup, we boertjies<sup>vii</sup> we are really getting screwed here’... The Coloureds will also get involved and we’ll end up by saying, ‘No man, the blacks get all the nice jobs. We get the shit end of the stick.’ That’s when we’re sitting in the parade room and everybody will laugh about it. (SAPS)

While it seems that it is in the context of humour that race and *gender* get addressed most directly, it is questionable to what extent this constitutes the development of capacity to name, and enter into dialogue about, social positionings in ways that do the required “race work.” This humour, as cited here, hides power imbalances and buys into, rather than challenges, racial “common sense,” thus acting as a vehicle for perpetuating, rather than deconstructing, racism.

(f) The ability to translate (interpret) coded hegemonic practices

*It is clear that many interactions and organisational activities operate through coded hegemonic practices, where the power, racial, gender and other messages and are reproduced in ways that obfuscate their character, and make them difficult to name as such. Without question, there is no lack of skill in encoding privilege and prejudice. Those in positions of power within the organisations clearly know what is expected in terms of language and “correct” procedures, and are careful to maintain the face presentation of the company. Nevertheless,*

*numerous examples were given by respondents of ways in which these practices were able to conceal underlying power dynamics and continue processes of marginalisation, discrimination and unfair competitive advantage. Two examples described below are maintaining the public visibility of whiteness and circumventing black managers:*

The one issue I have a problem with is that when it comes to the outside world, there is a tendency not to send Africans as representatives of the company; maybe it is fear that the guys could be poached, or may embarrass the company. Is it a lack of trust! There is that unwillingness to send Africans to outside forums even in areas where it could make sense and the EECF [Employment Equity Forum] has no powers over this. On paper there appears to be commitment but the actions are not supportive. (African Manager - Sekupu).

Yes I think there is a lot of pressure on this guys maybe they can not report straight to you because you are a black Manager. 'I prefer to rather report to a General Manager instead of going to [Packing] Manager -- no I go straight to the next level.' On my side black Managers don't last, especially in this plant. (Manager-LSAM)

*As has been shown in this article to be the general trend for CDL in these organisations, it is those who are oppressed by hegemonic systems--whether by direct or indirect, overt or covert means--who seem to be able to recognise and name these practices most skillfully. Those who perpetuate the encoded practices explain their practices in terms of doing their work professionally, maintaining standards and treating everyone equally. The woman below is not fooled by the attempt to hide behind an apparent language barrier to exclude her and sabotage her productivity:*

Especially the floor manager he's got too much racism, ja. Like when I am trying to make an order by him and I think that the best person to ask is the floor manager, so like I know that he can speak English but I find that he takes the coloured person. When I make an order by him he speaks Afrikaans to this coloured guy who then must translate it to me. And this other

manager I say I must make an order but he says “what did you say? Write it down!” Why must I write it down if he can hear what I am saying? Things like that. He thinks that he is better than us why must he be rude to us? If you see him and you want to make an order and a coloured guy comes then it’s meant to be first come first served but he will always serve that coloured guy first and tell me to wait. (Black female Xhosa-speaking employee-RC).

*The twelve studies indicated that hegemonic whiteness is increasingly being encoded through discourses of globalisation. Since sanctions were lifted, South African companies have become part of the international trading community, and have been striving to develop competitive edge. In these circumstances, English as the international language of business, and western cultural styles are held to be the appropriate conduits for employees wanting to “add value” to the company. These “standards” are evoked even in circumstances where they are not relevant to the job, and in ways that keep the speakers of African languages constantly on the back foot.*

- (g) An analysis of the ways that diversity hierarchies and institutionalised oppressions are mediated by class inequality and inflected in specific social contexts

I think our management team apart from [a particular manager] is 80/20 white. 80% is lily white ...What I see lacking is a succession plan.” – (Shop floor employee-LSAM )

The above comment indicates how, in general, the “stickiness” of class translated within the work place into differentiated status positions within the organisations studied, and was found to inflect people’s experience of race and gender, and also the manner in which diversity was handled.

I can say with the Managers there is a lot of apartheid and that is the reason – (Shop floor employee- LSAM)

Managers are here to stop fire, they are very defensive. How can they do diversity management? Soft issues are the last thing in their minds (Coloured Professional -Sekupu).

A fairly widely held opinion, also reflected above, was that people who were secure in class and status privilege tended not to be greatly engaged with the emotional salience of these issues to Others. One researcher comments:

Astoundingly, the chairperson of the Committee, a white male director, was unable to recall the diversity intervention. However, he noted that he might have been absent on the day of the intervention (FI)

*Once again, it seems that working class women, particularly black working class women, experience levels of gender- and race- related hardship in this intersectional space from which middle classness normally protects more privileged, and white, women:*

In 1999 I went on maternity leave. Then I came back, then I could only take a month leave, a straight shift, but they know it's not easy when you have a baby and the baby needs care and that. They don't see to give you any longer, maybe two months, or three, just back to the day shift. They force you, if you can't work the night shift, then you must take your things and leave... so in that regard they don't help women. So here you have to be afraid to have a baby, because when you come back, then there is no work for you, or they tell you: If you can't work night shift then you must stay where you are. Stay at home once and that's what they tell you and that's what happens (SFPC Floorworker - Coloured woman)

Where there was engagement with these issues by high status actors, it came across as being much more driven by "bottom line" concerns, or keeping the organisation in line with Employment Equity legislation:

We do a lot around equity – it is the single most important thing that is done with diversity. If you do nothing else make sure you get representivity. It has been hard in certain areas. The lab has

historically been a certain profile, artisans, fork lift drivers – we need to make these groups diverse. We do mentorship, the [executive assistant] amongst others – people with potential we take them under our wing and get them to grow. But this is an interim measure – we need to have numbers first (General Manager - LSAM).

*Nevertheless, there were instances where it was clear that people in more advantaged spaces in the organisation were indeed aware of how privilege could interfere with their grasp of other people's experiences of the workplace, and that this called for a measure of humility in the way in which these experiences are approached:*

We're not able to put our finger on it yet. I can give you my thoughts for now. What happens is that you've got this huge gap between this is level 3 and this is level 4 and then you've got this is level 2 and this is level 1. And it's different lives that we are leading understanding what's going on here. We don't know. I mean we don't know the difficulty that that guy – you know I'm speaking for myself now – that guy who works on the line, we don't know what his issues are... and it's not answering your question around behaviour but the reason I can't answer it well enough, is because you have a management group of people, you get car allowances, you also get other sorts of benefits, you see things from a different perspective and through a different lens and then you get the guys who are – you know, we have different sets of problems and different behaviours and different issues if we were to delve down deeper we would never have guessed or understood it – you know, because we've never experienced it... And I think just in terms of behaviours, we don't have that empathy here at a more senior level and we don't know how to do it. So just in terms of the difficulties and the challenges around diversity that exist - is that there's just too big a gap in terms of socio-economic stuff here in terms of us. (HR executive - LSAM).

It would be a mistake, however, to regard the raced and gendered inflection of class as limited to those in the lower echelons of workplace. The experiences of black people in management, or in professional

positions, were also shaped by their entanglement with cultures of whiteness and maleness, at those levels in their organisations. This is important as it speaks to the fact that being black and middle class remains a qualitatively different experience than being white and middle class. The power of whiteness was experienced in various processes of “loss of soul,” assimilatory demands, processes of “double consciousness,” self-doubt and excessive pressure to prove oneself under conditions of permanent scepticism. The same applied for all women in management encountering the cultures of maleness, but of course white women do not have the added “burden of race.”

In the beginning I experienced a feeling of loneliness. At times I feel it would be much better to have a black colleague to talk to because of a cultural background, sharing talks, jokes etc. I’ve learned a lot from my colleagues. Through time, the boundary disappeared. The longer you stay with people with different cultural and race the more you learned to adapt to each other’s cultures. White people find the black people noisy, very slow in doing things in reasoning in acting in doing things. The more you mix you start adopting the white culture. (IHL)

It took some time before I felt that the white students and colleagues accepted me for what I am. I think it was fear of lowering the standard. The first thought they must have had was here is a black teacher and they have bad connotations of the quality. They didn’t know how to address me; I had to make them feel at home. There are still issues. I deserve the respect as their lecturer. It’s a constant feeling that I need to prove myself. I’m looking forward to the day not to be judged by my colour but by my character. I am capable to do my job and should not be questioned or judged on my colour. (Black female junior lecturer -IHL)

Nevertheless, those in lower echelons of the organisations who not only have less positional power, but also less social capital generally, remain particularly vulnerable. The odds remain stacked against their being able to shift understandings within the organisations to reflect their concerns. In these contexts, processes such as diversity workshops which, when

not handled well, open up such issues may leave workers in an even more exposed position:

It appeared that the workshops added to the dilemma as people were invited to confront issues, but the situation backfired, “a lower level person has no backing, it is still us and them”. The comments raised during these workshops resulted in vindictive reactions i.e. letter on personal file, but also left some staff with a fear, “I am too scared to say anything now.” (Yaco van der Westhuizen - CO)

Data also provided evidence of how working in different industries, themselves going through different business phases, may change the experience of particular racialized and gendered groups. In an industry undergoing restructuring, the aging white men who were employed under conditions of apartheid era “job reservation,” found it hard to accept the loss of guarantees previously secured by white masculinity. It was particularly difficult for them that those likely to come into the workplace at their class level were now likely to be black, and possibly better educated.

Qualifications - you don't have much... If they can decide to restructure, so we've got somebody for the job who's got qualifications. Remember, every year [LSAM], they will tell you in the technical side, they want ... qualifications and if that person doesn't have, the chance is that he might not be here the next five years” – (Shop floor employee - LSAM)

- (h) An engagement with issues of transformation of these oppressive systems towards deepening social justice in all levels of social organisation.

In line with the findings reported throughout this paper, it appeared that this aspect of diversity literacy, the commitment to changing the unequal status quo, is least likely to be found in the management, notably middle management, and professional levels of organisations.

Middle and top management (except for one) have not asked for any intervention from this office as far as diversity is concerned. Short and sweet there's been no interest. (SFPC)

More accurately, at these levels there seemed to be resistance to the approaches, attitudes and skills that constitute a diversity literate approach to workplace issues, generally. The resistance sometimes takes the form of a laissez-fait, disengaged stance towards diversity issues, as this HIV-AIDS office bearer reports:

As peer educators we are supposed to work together with management. But they just leave it up to us. . . . It's like HIV to [RC] is not important. I don't know if they are ignoring it or what. Maybe they are saying 'it's not us'. Today you are fine. You don't worry about tomorrow. (RC)

At other times it appears as more active hostility to change processes:

You have rights but as soon as you want to use it, management gets upset and wants to discipline you. (RC)

Pervasive resistance to change initiatives, in different forms and at different levels of aggressiveness, especially from management levels, was the primary finding across all twelve case studies, as was the concomitant frustration among a large proportion of people at lower levels of the organizations, and many women at all levels.

## **Conclusion**

*Critical Diversity Literacy* seems to very unequally distributed within the organizations studied in the DEISA project, and does not follow the lines of formal educational literacy. Indeed, a great deal of evidence for what appears to be a bifurcation in CDL in the South African organizations emerges in the material analysed. The analysis shows a much greater level of CDL amongst those who are in less powerful positions than amongst those in dominant positions, both organizationally and in terms of hegemonic social positionings. It is important to note here that the issue of *Critical Diversity Literacy* cannot be reduced merely a lack of interpersonal or intercultural empathy/competence, while these certainly

may be factors at play. While it is to be expected that groups may have a better grasp of the issues that affect them personally, and less interest or concern for those that are affected by issues that they are not, it cannot be enough for those concerned with *emancipatory* social change to leave it at a level of analysis that does not take power inequality into account. The workplace has to be recognized as a site of complex relationships of reproduction and challenge of unequal relationships of dominance, compliance, resistance and change.

What becomes apparent is that those responsible for driving transformation are not likely to be invested in changing the workplace, both at the simple demographic, or Employment Equity level, or at the deeper, more radically demanding level of organizational ethos and culture, as long as they perceive the changes to be irrelevant or even inimical to their own interests in a society that still constructs group interests as polarized along racialized and gendered lines. As long as this remains the status quo, legislation seems destined not to be able to achieve the sought after changes in the South African society.

It is clear, then, that consciousness and political will need to be cultivated that enable people to see how diversity issues link to broader societal well being and sustainability, and how the deforming effects of oppression diminish and ultimately threaten us all. A problem for those who wish to promote diversity in the workplace is that the operations of power that maintain the status quo are invisible, and perhaps outside of the conscious behavior of those who perpetuate and collude with them. address issues of social justice and equity central to feminism This article has provided a model, *Critical Diversity Literacy*, as a lens through which an orientation for transformation can be made visible and amenable to (self) examination. Egbo ( 2008) has postulated the need for those with organizational power to undertake a personal critical diversity audit as a first step towards successful diversity implementation in organisations. The CDL model provides a means to undertake such audits, both at the individual and organizational level, as well as providing a conceptual tool for teaching and implementing transformation towards more socially just approaches to workplace diversity, even in especially complex postcolonial contexts.

<sup>1</sup> I am deeply indebted to France Winddance Twine, whose concept of *racial literacy* (2004) I have adapted and extended.

<sup>1</sup> Members of the research team based at the University of Cape Town: Professor Melissa Steyn, Professor Crain Soudien, Professor Kurt April, Claire Kelly

<sup>1</sup> Members of the research team at Unisa: Professor Lize Booysen; Professor Stella Nkomo

<sup>1</sup> SANPAD International Collaborator: Professor Philomena Essed

<sup>1</sup> Except where companies actually wished to be identified, pseudonyms in the form of generic descriptors are given to the companies.

<sup>1</sup> Because the case studies were conducted by twelve different researchers, the systems for referencing interviewees were not uniform. Quotations are reproduced from the respective research reports. Where the report itself is cited, it is referenced as such.

<sup>1</sup> "Boer" which literally means "farmer," has been used to refer to Afrikaners. It is often considered to have derogatory connotations. It is used here in the diminutive "boertjies" which denotes affectionate, light hearted, apparently self-deprecating banter.

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