Diversifying the workplace in nonprofit organizations : discourses and perspectives on ethnic diversity

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Abstract This study analyses the perspectives of nonprofit organizations (NPOs) on workplace diversity. Organisational diversity is a well-established research topic in both profit management and organization studies, as well as in nonprofit scholarship. However, diversity is often discussed from a managerial point of view and, particularly in nonprofits, with little attention to workplace diversity. Using interview data from 25 Belgian NPOs, we explore how leaders in different types of nonprofits approach workplace diversity, discursively and in their organizational practices. Our analysis is centred around Maier and Meyer's (2011) typology on nonprofit governance and aims to understand how workplace diversity is perceived in organizations with a domestic, professionalist, grassroots, and civic discourse. We outline the main diversity perspectives underlying these governance discourses. Our study reveals that the way NPO leaders approach workplace diversity is shaped by their overall governance, resulting in differing discourses that go beyond business or social justice rationales. We conclude that there are various ways in which NPOs differentiate diversity, making it important not only to go beyond a managerial/business and social justice discourse, but also to 'unpack' the different forms in which civic or grassroots discourses for example manifest themselves in the nonprofit sector.

Keywords: diversity, diversity perspectives, nonprofit organizations, discourses, social justice

1. Introduction

In the past few decades, there have been various understandings of diversity, and numerous studies have explored how identities and diversity are constructed in specific social, historical and organizational contexts (Özbilgin, 2019; Zanoni & Janssens, 2004). However, defining diversity remains a slippery and challenging endeavour, mainly because the characteristics that

are perceived as prominent in formatting identities are not consistent over time, space and cultural context; diversity is therefore a geographically, temporally and culturally contingent phenomenon (Gotsis & Kortezi, 2015). Despite this, diversity studies generally define the term by reference to sociodemographic (gender, race, ethnicity and age) and sociocultural characteristics (educational level, financial status, social class, religion etc.). The term is thus all-embracing but conceals power and inequality (Ahmed & Swan, 2006; Benschop, 2001) and the influences of context (Özbilgin, 2019; Zanoni, Janssens, Benschop, & Nkomo, 2010).

The goal of this study is to offer a better understanding of workplace diversity in the context of nonprofit organizations (NPOs). Our contribution focuses on the sociodemographic composition of employees and pays specific attention to ethnicity. We do this by exploring discourses on workplace diversity among leaders of various nonprofit organizations. Several studies have already demonstrated how specific organizational features and missions influence organizations' commitment to diversity (see Eikenberry, Mirabella, & Sandberg, 2019; Janssens & Zanoni, 2021; Robinson, 2020; Tomlinson & Schwabenland, 2010). This commitment to diversity is most often described in terms of approaches based on utilitarian arguments (the 'business approach') or approaches based on 'social justice'. The business approach addresses how diversity affects organizational practices and outcomes and aims to understand how and to what extent diversity in the organization is able to improve nonprofit performance by capitalizing on its benefits (e.g., Brimhall, 2019; Villotti, Stinglhamber, & Desmette, 2019; Weisinger, Borges-Méndez, & Milofsky, 2016). In contrast with this, scholars embracing the social justice approach have recently highlighted issues of inequality and inequity in the sector, emphasizing that because NPOs aim to reflect the public they seek to serve, they often legitimize exclusion and become a playing field for unequal power relations (Heckler, 2019; Nickels & Leach, 2021; Knoppers et al., 2015).

We, however, argue that there is a need to look more systematically at the dynamics of workplace diversity in NPOs, beyond the dualism of business and social justice approaches. The nonprofit sector is a complex range of different organizations, interacting with various actors such as beneficiaries, group members, volunteers, staff, boards, private or public funders, all of which have a different impact on how diversity is approached (Maier and Meyer, 2011). In order to bring a better understanding of the varying discourses on diversity in NPOs, we centre our analysis around Maier and Meyer's (2011) typology of the various notions of nonprofit governance discourses.

For the purpose of this paper we will focus on NPO leaders, as their leadership position is very likely to influence work outcomes, organizational programmes and the overall performance of organizations (Aboramadan & Dahleez, 2020). We propose to address the following question: What are the discourses nonprofit leaders draw upon to describe their commitment to diversity in the workplace? We examine this question by studying the diversity discourses and practices of 25 welfare and sociocultural nonprofits in the Belgian region of Flanders. Our data suggests that the conceptualization of diversity is tied to the organizational discourse, which is determined by organizations' governance mechanisms. We find that the degree to which diversity becomes a matter of interest or not in NPO's depends on its fit with the organizations' governance discourse. Following the typology of Maier & Meyers (2011), we find, for example, that leaders in organizations with a predominant grassroots discourse show less interest in pursuing diversity practices in recruitment efforts and are generally more focused on attracting those who are committed to their cause (see also Walker & Stepnick, 2014). Finally, our analysis also shows the high degree of discretionary power that leaders have when implementing diversity practices. This means that organizational leaders' personal experiences and values play an important role in choosingon the extent to which and how theyapproach workplace diversity (see also Brimhall, 2019; Fulton, Oyakawa, & Wood, 2019).

The scientific value of this study is twofold. Firstly, when taken together, existing studies offer mainly single-level explorations of diversity and equality issues. They predominantly research board diversity and to a much lesser extent workplace diversity, more specifically whether and how the organization is developing a discourse on diversity and implementing practices in the workplace. In addition, they pay little attention to the overall functioning of the organization, such as the interplay between diversity discourses and practices, stakeholders and employee expectations as well as organizational goals, rules and routines and how these can relate to the way diversity is perceived (Nachmias, Mitsakis, Aravopoulou, Rees, & Kouki, 2021).

Secondly, we argue that it is of critical importance to produce workplace diversity research that matters for social change, as organizations play a key role in (re)producing inequality in contemporary societies and the structuring of inequality along social identities (Coule & Carole Bain; Dodge, Eikenberry, & Coule, 2021; Janssens & Zanoni, 2021). However, in order to understand how workplace diversity contributes to nonprofits' mission of civic engagement and social change, we need to gain a better understanding of how nonprofits construct diversity in the workplace. The contribution of this study then lies in its exploration of workplace diversity as contingent upon different organizational discourses of governance such as civic, grassroots or professionalist discourses. This approach enables us to examine how and when diversity becomes emancipatory (Ahonen, Tienari, Meriläinen, & Pullen, 2014). The civic and grassroots discourse for example respectively refer to the way organizations aim to strengthen a sense of collectivism or establish grassroots democracy (Maier & Meyer, 2011), which may impact how diversity is approached. We believe that such research is especially relevant to this sector, as NPOs operate for a collective or social benefit, and in many cases a significant part of their social mission is aimed at alleviating inequalities and tackling dominant power dynamics, in some cases through advocacy work. Despite this social emancipatory role, we find that only few NPOs have approached workplace diversity from a more critical perspective.

1.1. Diversity beyond business and social justice rationales

Literature on workplace diversity is often rooted in classic conceptions of diversity management in for-profit organisations. Many studies in this research area focus on empirically assessing the effect of diversity on organizational effectiveness and thus predominantly perceive workplace diversity instrumentally, in terms of potential performance outcomes or a 'diversity dividend' (Bernstein et al., 2015). This longstanding business-like approach to diversity originated in organization and management studies and undoubtedly left an important imprint on how diversity is approached within nonprofit scholarship (Sanders & McClellan, 2014). In addition, a large body of nonprofit diversity literature is focused on board diversity (Bernstein et al., 2015; Cody, Lawrence, Prentice, & Clerkin, 2022; Fredette, Bradshaw, & Krause, 2016; Fredette & Sessler Bernstein, 2019; Harris, 2014), but does not look at diversity in workplace settings. Buse et al. (2016) are right to stress that '*diversity within nonprofit boards holds potential for insuring that organizational programs and services reflect the needs and interests of the community and for bringing multiple perspectives into boardrooms'*, but at the same time there is little to no data on the diversity experiences and knowledge of actors in the nonprofit workplace, be they staff or clients (Maureen E Feit, 2019; Nickels & Leach, 2021).

In organizational diversity studies, managerialism is often related to a 'business case' for diversity, which calls for 'capitalizing on diversity' and hence mobilizing workplace diversity as an 'asset' for the organization to improve service delivery and economic productivity (Swan & Fox, 2010). In the case of NPOs, this means that workplace diversity is framed in terms of the value it brings to the social mission of the organization. At the other end of the scale, scholars have widely criticized this approach, stating that diversity should focus on material redistribution and cultural recognition as requirements for organizations to be fully inclusive of diversity (Swan, 2015). In the following we will consider the still existing tensions in nonprofit literature between valuing diversity for instrumental, managerial reasons and valuing diversity

for intrinsic, justice reasons. We will subsequently move beyond this basic dichotomy to reconceptualize diversity as an organizational product.

Opinions are divided as to how diversity should be and is approached in NPOs. Some argue that the two cases for diversity are compatible in NPOs, as – from a managerial approach to nonprofit governance – being business-like and hence treating diversity as an organizational asset is compatible with the social justice mission of nonprofits (Sanders & McClellan, 2014). Others argue that business and social justice rationales are inherently contradictory. Several arguments are put forward for this. A managerial conception of diversity not only conceals the persistence of systematic inequalities and discrimination affecting historically disadvantaged groups, it also perpetuates gendered and racialized structures and individualizes and depoliticizes societal problems (Ahmed, 2007a; Gotsis & Kortezi, 2015, p. 17; Heckler, 2019; Keevers, Treleaven, Sykes, & Darcy, 2012; Maier, Meyer, & Steinbereithner, 2016; Nickels & Leach, 2021; Noon, 2007, 2018). Hence, such an approach defines diversity solely within relations of 'value' and devalues substantive rationalities based on empathy, religion, aesthetics etc. (Maier & Meyer, 2011), which in turn creates a skewed power distribution.

The distribution of power that arises in organizations can hamper workplace democracy and participation in favour of dominant group members, boards, private or public funders (Baines, Cunningham, & Fraser, 2011; Keevers et al., 2012; Maier et al., 2016). This can lead organizations to become trapped in institutional 'interlocks', as change efforts can be undermined by other institutions' reluctance to change, keeping societal issues like diversity peripheral (Jonsen, Tatli, Özbilgin, & Bell, 2013). Amstutz, Nussbaumer, and Vöhringer (2021) for example draw upon the notion of 'logic of appropriateness'. They show that organizations, although they intend to reduce gender inequalities through organizational policies, are hindered from doing so because they are reliant on acceptance by other organizations, which leads to a reproduction of heteronormativity.

Despite the wide-ranging debate on managerialism in the nonprofit literature, there is a need to move beyond a classic understanding of business approaches and to take into account different and distinctive discourses of nonprofit governance necessary to capture the broad variety of organizations in this sector. Nonprofits draw on various discursive resources (e.g., their grassroots or civic discourse) to produce a range of overlapping meanings for diversity that do not always fit with understandings based on the 'business versus social justice' binary (Tomlinson & Schwabenland, 2010; Janssens & Zanoni, 2005). An approach to workplace diversity cannot, therefore, be tied to one discourse only, whether this is informed by business or social justice; rather, it is driven by a multiplicity of ideas, motivations and agendas (Swan & Fox, 2010). In our attempt to draw attention to the many ways nonprofit leaders approach diversity, we argue that the nonprofit's overall organizational governance shapes how diversity in the workplace is perceived and approached, both at a discursive level and in terms of practices, and that tracing these multiple meanings is especially relevant for NPOs, given that they are not only focused on profit-making but are also mission-driven.

1.2. Diversity perspectives and nonprofit governance

To better understand why NPOs adopt a certain perspective on diversity, we look at characteristics of different types of NPOs, particularly those relating to their governance, mission, tasks and actors, and we subsequently outline the main diversity perspectives underlying their way of working. A variety of perspectives on diversity within organizations have been identified in the literature (Ely & Thomas, 2001; Vos, Çelik, & de Vries, 2016). They can be classified on a continuum ranging from doing nothing or actively resisting diversity to having an elaborate diversity strategy (Dass & Parker, 1999; Podsiadlowski, Gröschke, Kogler, Springer, & Van Der Zee, 2013).

Moving beyond a solely managerialist discourse, Maier and Meyer (2011) developed a typology of discourses on nonprofits and their characteristics. We draw upon their conceptual framework to understand different ways in which diversity can manifest itself in discourses and practices in the workplace of various NPOs, and how exactly specific workings may impede or facilitate inclusion of diversity. The discourses designate a way of communicating about organizations that is internally consisent and mutually distinctive. Below, we discuss each of these discourses (with the exception of the managerialist discourse, which we referred to in the preceding section) and try to link them to specific approaches to diversity. However, many of these discourses continue to exist alongside managerialism (Meyer & Maier, 2015).

Domestic Discourse

A domestic discourse focuses on the achievement of an explicit mission (e.g. youth welfare work, recreation and social services, development aid). The organization is primarily accountable to their target group, often defined as a group with specific social needs which are not adequately catered for. However, this target group is not necessarily represented within the organisation, in which employees are core participants. Relationships between leaders and employees are characterized by mutual loyalty, trust, and personal negotiations; actors are expected to be willing to make big sacrifices to 'fit in with' the organisation and division of labour is flexible. Status differences between members are based on intensity and length of their engagement. There is also a flexible and informal way of communicating. Creating an 'atmosphere' where members are considerate of each other and do not argue or compete is important, as well as socializing and meeting for 'cosy' get-togethers. Personnel are recruited on the basis that they are loyal and fit with the group so that organizational harmony can be maintained. High qualifications and performances are of secondary importance.

This ‘fitting in’ is particularly interesting in terms of diversity. According to Ahmed (2007b), to fit into an organization is also to feel a certain comfort. Allowing difference in the organization can therefore be dependent upon the extent to which these differences undermine feelings of comfort within an organisation. As beneficiaries are seen as the primary addressees of governance, we might expect organizations to reinforce homogeneity. Taking a phenomenological approach to examine how some individuals feel more at home and have a sense of fitting in, Ahmed (2007b) states that many institutions have a shared inheritance in whiteness, which affects how we ‘inhabit space’ and ‘who’ or ‘what’ we orient ourselves towards, repeating white habits and producing white space. This leads to what she refers to as ‘institutional whiteness’, operating through white habits that are inherited and reproduced (Swan, 2015). The ability to belong in an organization can then be seen to depend on the same use of an (upper-)middle class vernacular, body language, dress, belonging to the same residential area, having the same political affiliation, etc. (Heckler, 2017). However, as beneficiaries are organisations’ primary addressees, organisations may also feel pressured to commit to diversity as an asset to achieve their mission. For example, to meet the needs of service users, organizations can make it an objective to match their employees’ background to that of beneficiaries, to foster a sense of familiarity and support. Diversity is then perceived from an access perspective, focusing on increasing organizational effectiveness by establishing a better match between organizational demographics and those of critical stakeholders (Podsiadlowski et al., 2013). However, from this perspective we may also expect organizational resistance when it comes to changing structural elements in the organization with regard to diversity, as this is at odds with securing a coherent ‘fit’ (Fitzsimmons & Callan, 2020).

Professionalist Discourse

The professionalist discourse primarily revolves around expertise and discretionary knowledge (e.g. hospitals and other health services, legal services and related assistance, vocational

counselling). Organizations aim to achieve performance through professional standards. Employees often work independently, focus on relationships with experts and clients and achieve performance through their knowledge and qualifications. They are guided by ideals and standards that originate from the profession; this creates a shared commitment and a strong professional identity. The personnel practices and recruitment emphasize educational achievements and 'proficiency'. Centring on professional standards, this tenet, in our view, seems to align with a colour-blind perspective on diversity, referring to the belief that people should be treated equally no matter where they are from. Qualifications are considered more important than ethnic and cultural background (Maier & Meyer, 2011; Podsiadlowski et al., 2013). Although this colour-blind perspective may stem from a well-intentioned desire to avoid bias, a plethora of scholarly work demonstrates that such a perspective can constrain and legitimize practices that maintain class, gender and racial stratification (Bonilla-Silva & Embrick, 2006; Siegel, Post, Appiah, Butler, & Grey, 2001; Slay & Smith, 2011).

Grassroots Discourse

A grassroots discourse in organizations revolves around achievement of success through grassroots democracy (e.g. feminist organizations, ethnic associations, organizations promoting local culture, film communities, etc.). Taking a clear position towards substantial matters is crucial and linked with the image and principles of the organization. Members are autonomous but participate in all decisions of the organization, taking personal responsibility for these decisions. There are low requirements when it comes to members' performance in a managerial sense. In many cases the organization is autonomous from funders. In the workplace, egalitarism, collectivism and openness are at the heart of the organization and hierarchies are rejected. Special attention is paid to equal participation of gender groups, but ideally people volunteer on their own initiative and based on identification with the organization (Maier & Meyer, 2011). We therefore suggest that the grassroots discourse implies a fairness perspective

on diversity. Podsiadlowski et al. (2013) see this perspective as focusing on equal and fair treatment so that the demographics of the organization reflect the demographics of society. Adopting a fairness perspective on diversity often means supporting conformism, being aware of the need to overcome potential disadvantages for specific groups. However, as Chen (2009) shows, grassroots movements are often organized in an ad hoc way, attracting those who are committed to their cause, which can result in homogeneous organizational membership by race, age, gender, or other characteristics and potentially reinforce inequality by stratifying positions along racial and gender lines (Chen, 2009). In addition, Walker and Stepick (2014) show that even when grassroots organizations are mindful of sociodemographic differences, this aspect can represent a significant challenge because of the way that sociodemographic identities restrict the formation of collective identities.

Civic Discourse

Lastly, organizations with a civic discourse achieve their success by securing mass support, with the goal of unifying and strengthening a sense of collectivism both within the organization as well as towards external actors (e.g. community and neighbourhood organizations, social development, advocacy organizations). Membership plays an important role and organizations have universal rules and democratic procedures in place, granting all members equal rights to participate in decision-making. Recent studies have indeed shown how community (ethnic) representation is associated with the extent to which nonprofit devote efforts to develop advocacy activities (see e.g., Kim & Mason, 2018; Zhang & Guo, 2021), which is associated with a civic discource. Contrary to other discourses, a civic discourse is highly conscious of diversity, differences of interest, and power struggles, and therefore seeks to secure a broad membership base and reflect the demographics of society. As such, recruitment and personnel practices are concerned with issues of fairness, transparency, and representativeness. Employees are valued as individuals and not only for their specific diversity attributes, and

there is an awareness that addressing diversity requires collective and organizational learning. We therefore argue that there is a clear affinity between the civic discourse and an integration and learning perspective on diversity. From this perspective, employees are valued as individuals and not only for specific diversity attributes, allowing organisations to connect diversity issues with collective and organizational learning processes (Bernstein & Bilimoria, 2013; Podsiadlowski et al., 2013; Thomas & Ely, 1996). Nonetheless, research has shown that the aim of civic organizations to achieve participation that reflects societal demographics may recreate the same power structures and racial inequality, reinforcing issues of social inequity (Maureen Emerson Feit, Philips, & Coats, 2022).

The aim of this research is to show the perspectives of leaders on the organizations' commitment to workplace diversity, and to improve our understanding of how diversity is contingent upon the governance discourse in the organization. As we will see, there is a multilayered understanding of these diversity perspectives, involving different mechanisms of justification: moral responsibility, attracting diverse target groups and reclaiming a legitimate position towards stakeholders, offering organizational provision on behalf of the existing target group, and alleviating social inequalities related to historically marginalized communities. We use the framework developed by Maier and Meyer as presented above, and assess to what extent different perspectives on diversity based on scholarly literature also occur in practice. In this way, we aim to show how diversity perspectives are intertwined with the overall governance, accountability and routine organizational activity of nonprofits.

2. Method

This research aims to explore how different and distinctive discourses of nonprofit governance can account for leaders' commitment to diversity, drawing on in-depth interviews and survey data. In the following paragraphs, we outline our case selection, provide an overview of our research participants and their sociodemographic characteristics and describe our data collection.

Case selection

We initially contacted 50 organizations referred to in a large-scale survey database on civil society. This survey was conducted as part of a large inter-university project called Civil Society and Innovation Flanders (CSI Flanders) (see Laoukili, Oosterlynck, & Cools, 2019). The data available offered valuable information on just over 500 NPOs: their (sub)sector, size, members, income, as well as information on how organizations deal with marketization, their relationship with government, ethnic diversity, members, staff and volunteers. We used the survey to select a heterogeneous purposive sample of NPOs across Flanders. We focused on welfare and sociocultural organizations, which make up the largest part of the CSI Flanders database. More specifically, the data allowed us to select organizations of varying sizes, ranging from small organizations with four employees to more high-capacity NPOs with more than 100 employees. Furthermore, we narrowed our cases down to organizations that acknowledge ethnic diversity as a challenge. These organizations vary widely in the ethnic composition of their employees. Finally, we included a range of organizations, with several social missions and roles in terms of service delivery, civic engagement and advocacy, with leaders whose types of contact with their personnel varies, and with different organizational structures. According to Flyvbjerg (2006), our cases can be regarded as a very heterogeneous selection of 'critical cases'.

This means that the varied NPOs in our sample were selected strategically in relation to the general topic of this study.

In total, 23 organizations from the CSI dataset were included in this research. Two other organizations were contacted through snowball sampling, as they were frequently mentioned by a majority of organizations as 'an example' when it comes to diversity. We thus ended up analysing empirical data on 25 welfare and sociocultural organizations in the Belgian region of Flanders. The remaining, nonparticipating organizations either did not respond or declined due to a lack of time and having to adjust to the newly imposed COVID-19 regulations in their organizations. Overall, the characteristics of the nonparticipating organizations differed little from the organizations that did participate in our study. They were similarly heterogeneous in terms of (sub)sector, size, location and ethnic diversity.Respondents

An overview of the research participants and characteristics of the selected organizations is presented in table 1. All respondents but two (organization 11 and 13) belong to the majority ethnic population in Flanders and all occupy a leading position as director or coordinator of an NPO. Respondents in this study function as key decision-makers in the organization and are predominantly tasked with overseeing and acquiring organizational projects, building networks with stakeholders as well as determining recruitment processes and selecting new employees. The use of leaders as key interviewees in this study allowed us to obtain information about the organization, its culture and workings that we as researchers might not be able to perceive and take into consideration (Folch & Ion, 2009). With regard to diversity, interviewing organizational leaders as key interviewees and decision-makers can provide an important window into how nonprofits respond to questions of workplace diversity.

Respondents	Position	Gender	Sector	Subsector	Employee ethnic diversity	Total employees
Respondent 1	Coordinator	M	SCS	Youth/Social Service	1-5%	27
Respondent 2	Coordinator	F	WS	Youth/Social Service	6-19%	120
Respondent 3	Managing Director	F	SCS	Youth/Health Insurance	1-5%	66
Respondent 4	Managing Director	F	SCS	Youth Service/Education	1-5%	6
Respondent 5	Managing Director	F	WS	Social Assistance	1-5%	4
Respondent 6	Managing Director	M	SCS	Self-help	6-19%	7
Respondent 7	Managing Director	M	SCS	Culture/Recreation	1-5%	23
Respondent 8	Managing Director	M	WS	Youth/Social Service	N/A	N/A
Respondent 9	Managing Director	F	SCS	Culture & Recreation/ Advocacy	6-19%	19
Respondent 10	Managing Director	M	SCS	Culture	0%	7
Respondent 11	Managing Director	F	WS	Crisis Intervention	6-19%	12
Respondent 12	Managing Director	F	WS	Advocacy/Civil Rights	60-79%	68
Respondent 13	Managing Director	M	WS	Advocacy/Civil Rights	80-94%	73
Respondent 14	Managing Director	M	WS	Youth/Social Service	N/A	N/A
Respondent 15	Managing Director and HR Director	F	WS	Youth/Social Service	40-59%	93
Respondent 16	Managing Director	M	WS	Job Training Program	N/A	N/A
Respondent 17	Coordinator	F	WS	Social Service/ Counselling	40-59%	93
Respondent 18	Managing Director	F	SCS	Culture/Recreation	N/A	N/A
Respondent 19	Managing Director and Coordinator	F	WS	Youth/Social Service	N/A	N/A
Respondent 20	Managing Director	M	WS	Advocacy/Civil Rights	N/A	N/A
Respondent 21	Managing Director	F	WS	Social Assistance	40-59%	8
Respondent 22	Managing Director	M	WS	Humanitarian Relief	20-39%	30
Respondent 23	Coordinator	M	SCS	Umbrella Organization	1-5%	N/A
Respondent 24	Coordinator	F	WS	Social Assistance	N/A	N/A
Respondent 25	Managing Director	M	WS	Youth/Social Service	N/A	84

Table 1 Research participants and characteristics of organizations and their workforce composition

Data collection

In a first step, the researcher attended a training session run by the Flemish sociocultural umbrella organization on intercultural solidarity, as well as several workshops, lectures and training events targeted at these key organizational figures. These training sessions and workshops gave the researcher the opportunity to get in touch with respondents and to make appointments for interviews. Due to COVID-19 restrictions, most interviews took place online through Zoom or Microsoft Teams and were conducted and analysed by the first author of this paper. The semi-structured questionnaire covered topics related to the participants' definition and perception of diversity, recruitment of minorities, workplace diversity discourses and practices and perceptions of the role of stakeholders regarding diversity. The interviews lasted between one and two hours. The researcher's position as a young female scholar from a minority ethnic background may have had important consequences for research into this topic. First, people might have been conscious of sexism or racism and have tried to persuade the researcher that they are aware of diversity issues, while emphasizing 'resistance' towards an anti-diversity discourse or 'emancipation'. As Alvesson and Kärreman (2011) state, this social desirability may be limited to 'discursive smartness', which legitimizes acting in certain ways and demonstrating awareness, while action is decoupled from this. Bearing this in mind, additional questions were asked, encouraging respondents to illustrate their replies with examples of workplace practices. Second, during the interviews the researcher noticed that leaders made comments and ideas on ethnic minority groups and the researcher's ethnic background. These were reflected in their choice of words such as 'foreigner' and in assumptions about, for example, the consumption, cultural preferences of minority ethnic groups in general. To establish trust and a safe environment, the researcher chose to adopt the same language as respondents, by, for example, similarly using words such as 'foreigners'. This strategy also allowed the researcher to focus and elaborate on examples of everyday workplace

practices. We thus conclude that the encounters between mostly majority ethnic leaders and a minority ethnic junior scholar gave rise to certain dynamics that exposed how the researcher's identity is socially less recognized than those of the interviewed groups. While this did lead to feelings of powerlessness and vulnerability, it easily debunked issues of social desirability, as respondents were clearly comfortable speaking freely about their ideas on minority ethnic employees (see also Egharevba, 2001; Kostet, 2021).

Data analysis

Finally, the interviews were transcribed and analysed based on the thematic analysis of Clarke and Braun (2014). The transcripts were reread, codes were assigned to certain text fragments and grouped in different themes. The themes were frequently revised and extended, and included discursive elements on legitimation, perception of minority employees, accountability toward stakeholders and material practices for managing workplace diversity. As the data collection and analysis overlapped, these steps were performed several times. This means that we already started transcribing and coding during the first interviews, and linked this back to our analysis. This iterative process allowed us to ask more specific questions about certain topics in the subsequent interviews. It can also be seen as promoting validity and allowing us to avoid and limit systematic bias in our results.

3. Results

In this section we will discuss our findings, based on in-depth interviews with leaders in 25 organizations. In the light of the organizing characteristics and narratives of our respondents we will set out the four discourses of governance in these organizations, based on Maier and Meyer (2011), and will subsequently outline the diversity perspectives identified. It is important to note that while these discourses enable a comprehensive view of the social and organizational structure of organizations, they are rarely self-contained and exclusive within one organization. In practice, different discourses coincide but carry unequal weight, making one discourse more dominant than others and therefore more powerful in shaping the organization's governance mechanisms.

3.1. A professionalist discourse: the role of qualifications

Not surprisingly, many organizational leaders refer to professionalist standards in their recruitment processes. For most nonprofits, organizational work is demand-driven, making it important to achieve performance through professional standards and by ensuring the same professional decision-making process for every individual or client. More in particular, for many respondents in our study the absence or underrepresentation of ethnic minorities was attributed to their inability to meet the organizations' professional standards, in terms of formal qualifications (education, language knowledge) but also of more informal and less tangible qualifications, such as fitting into the organization, self-knowledge or the ability to be a 'good' counsellor.

> *'People with a non-Dutch sounding name do apply for jobs, but they don't succeed, and I will not… I'll invite them for an interview to try to get more personnel diversity, but most of the time it starts with an application letter of which I think… You know, I want to take a lot of things into consideration but I'm not going to lower my requirements.*

> *We need a strong team to guide all those people with all those preconditions to a job. I can't lower my standards just because someone has another ethnic background by chance. So, I'm not going to discriminate positively. Someone has to reach the standard.' (*Director, organization for job training programmes*)*

In some organizations a professionalist discourse was more dominant in their overall functioning. Based on the literature, we assumed that these organizations would be most likely to approach diversity from a colour-blind perspective. One respondent, a director of a service organization for self-help groups, stated that because their mission is to offer the right support and advice to self-help groups, it is important that employees simply have the right expertise. He argued that as an organization, there is no need to explicitly aim to increase diversity nor strive for homogeneity. Diversity is rarely an issue and barely mentioned. When 'diversity' is mentioned, it is not associated with specific sociodemographic characteristics but rather with 'diversity of clientele' (in this case the self-help groups).

> *'We must work with the clients we have. If our client doesn't make a point out of it or makes diversity only their fifth or sixth objective, then we listen to them. […] Perhaps we are also not enough … familiarized to give our clients the right approach. […] It's a lack of methodology or approach. Not the lack of…views… or the idea that we should change the way we think in some way.'* (Director, umbrella organization for self-help organizations)

Moreover, as they prioritise professionalism and expertise, organizations can find themselves in an unsuitable position to tackle issues of diversity, even if they strive to do so. As the respondent states, their lack of expertise and knowledge in communicating about such matters is one of the reasons why they make no mention of diversity (work). The respondent however continues by expressing a clear conviction that they are not against diversity or wishing to reinforce homogeneity.

3.2. A grassroots discourse: diversity as a reflection of the moral values of the organization

In the literature review, we suggested that organizations in which a grassroots discourse is dominant will most likely have a fairness perspective on diversity. While many leaders in our study draw upon a fairness perspective, stating that '*organizations should be a reflection of society'*, some respondents explicitly link the adoption of this perspective to their grassroots values. When asked why organizational diversity is important, one respondent replied that '*we will be working for an increasingly smaller group of people, which would simply be wrong because that is not a reflection of the society in which we live.'*

The central notion of a grassroots discourse is that the organization should be a domination-free, consensus seeking space and that actors are fully informed about all issues, participate in decisions, know why a particular decision has been made, and, consequently, fully support the organization's course of action (Maier & Meyer, 2011). It was clear that the leaders we interviewed who explicitly lean towards a grassroots discourse view institutional recognition and a unanimous acknowledgment of diversity as of primary importance before taking any action towards diversity work.

> *'Our team follows us in how we think about diversity. That's very clear. It would be worse if we were to say that that is not the case […] [Volunteers] also have an input on policy and thus prior to writing the policy plan, they were also questioned, and it was clear that they think diversity is important as well. And diversity in its broad sense, not only ethnic cultural, but also gender, socioeconomic, city-countryside…'* (Director, youth recreation organization)

While many of the leaders in our study see the need to take action regarding existing diversity, we observed that organizations with a predominantly grassroots discourse rarely do diversity work. One possible explanation is that many of these organizations have homogeneous target groups and staff, mostly middle class and belonging to a white ethnic majority. In the view of

a director of a grassroots youth recreation organization, this was one of the reasons why there is no urgency to do diversity work. The organization, once established as a grassroots organization striving for class equality by offering recreation to *all* children, has become '*a predominantly white middle-class organization'* and one '*that has no trouble finding participants and volunteers.'* This is because *'there is not really a need to diversify. […] at least not the need in terms of survival.'*

But even leaders in organizations with a predominantly grassroots discourse, and with target groups that were not homogenous, showed no intention of carrying out diversity work and instead draw upon grassroots values when considering potential employees. This finding resonates with Walker & Stepick's (2014) study, which shows that because grassroots organizations are often focused on developing collective identities and shared understandings, they often avoid the challenges and conflicts associated with efforts to create a diverse workplace. The leader of one of these organisations, which is active in development aid, refers, rather, to the importance of two required qualifications in employees: solidarity, as this is one of the principles upon which the organization was established, and a personal interest in development aid. This is further illustrated by one of our respondents, who draws upon a fairness perspective by still addressing the need for support towards minority groups, yet states that: '*It's not that we are going to commit ourselves to [diversity]. You know, in job interviews, I go for quality and then… we wait to see who stands out.'*. By referring to the importance of quality, this respondent draws on a professionalist discourse, illustrating how organizations combine multiple discourses.

Finally, since great importance is attached to openness and people's own initiative in volunteering, there seems to be a reluctance to take any form of positive action in favour of historically marginalized communities, or to support government incentives for diversity. As one respondent argues:

[…] it should be intertwined in how you look at yourself and what you want to do as an organization. If that is not the case, then it will never be possible. Not with this one-off government subsidy, because you will end up instrumentalizing it in a problematic way and only do it temporarily because it has an advantage, and that advantage is called money. No, I do not believe in that.' (Director, grassroots organization for world cinema)

Thus, as mentioned, government incentives stand in stark contrast to grassroots principles, since they are a way of instrumentalizing diversity and since they hamper the 'organic' development of diversity.

3.2. A domestic discourse: diversity to ensure accessibility for the target group

In the previous overview we hypothesized that organizations with a domestic discourse could either become more homogeneous or could adopt an access perspective. It was clear that most respondents invoked an access perspective when discussing diversity. An argument often mentioned by leaders in favour of 'pursuing' diversity is that it can provide better access to the target group. For example, one respondent states that: '*bringing in diversity is important for beneficiaries as it familiarises them with the diversity in society'*. Ethnic cultural diversity is thus seen as an instrument for reaching specific organizational goals. For example, a coordinator clarifies why a member of a religious minority group fits best with the service group for young refugees. She then explains that the employee's more practical experience is less suited to other residential groups in the facility.

'In Group 8 [residential group for unaccompanied refugee minors] it can be extra useful if you have someone who is Muslim and who… understands the teenagers more. The woman who works there now has a different cultural background, she is also a little bit older, more mature and that really fits with that group. […] For that specific group, she was okay, but she isn't flexible enough to deploy in other groups, but I hired her because of Group 8.' (Coordinator and HR employee, special youth care centre)

Our assumption was further confirmed when organizations with a domestic discourse recognised diversity as a strategy that provides access to a diverse target group and brings value to the organizational programme. In some cases, even, the viability of the organizations depends on whether diversity is present. This is because the target group plays a pivotal role, be they families, children, youth, or – in the case of umbrella organizations – other organizations. When referring to diversity, organizations predominantly mention ethnic minorities because their target group is largely made up of vulnerable and historically marginalized communities. As a result, some organizations have established a diverse representation of employees over the years and consider workplace diversity as a given, meaning that diversity is visible and serves the functioning of the organization. The leader of an organization offering social welfare assistance, for example, stated the importance of making certain communities feel recognized, improving access to them and their welfare questions by focusing on matching counsellors with members of the target group based on sociodemographic characteristics.

Organizations in our study with a domestic discourse which have not yet established diverse representation all face exogenous forces pressing them to confront the whiteness of their organization. This was especially the case for youth organizations. This tension causes leaders to actively recruit diverse employees, so as not to *'lose any credibility as an organization'*. Similarly, another youth organization states: *'It is definitely important to show the visibility of a diverse team because our target group is diverse. That is really a must. It would be a disgrace if we were to be a completely white organization.'*

Also significant, albeit less frequently mentioned, is the importance of ethnic minority employees for contributing knowledge and frames of reference on how to critically examine and question the organization and its way of operating. Here, organization 'screening' by 'experience experts' such as ethnic minorities is considered valuable, as are narratives on

experienced racism. In other words, ethnic minorities are called upon to share their knowledge and experiences, thus enabling the organization to thrive and retain credibility.

Despite the need to establish a 'fit' with beneficiaries from minority groups, diversity can also bring tensions as 'differences' may be hard to fit into the organization, thus undermining its domestic 'ambitions'. In other words, while the arrival of diversity is required to maintain a 'fit' with beneficiaries from minority groups, it also potentially endangers a fit with other employees. One organisational leader talks about how cultural differences result in additional effort and commitment because there is no shared framework. This requires him to put in additional effort, which, according to the respondent, is received with great gratitude. Here, diversity clearly becomes a commitment, which according to Ahmed (2009) often requires those who embody diversity to express gratitude. The respondent continues that despite this difficulty and the doubts that accompany it, it is considered important to learn from it and to be able to gain credibility as an organization and within their target group.

> *'I have a colleague with a… with a different cultural background and I notice… It requires more attention. [...] When someone comes in here and has not mastered the framework we work in, that takes work. That's the case for everyone, but it requires more attention or more effort. It requires an open, honest attitude from me… and a quick feedback, to keep a close eye on things. That's always received with great gratitude and an incredible openness to learn, to grow… a lot more than with other colleagues.'* (Coordinator, umbrella organization for youth work)

Our results furthermore show that leaders in organizations whose workings lean more towards a civic discourse can also draw upon an access perspective, although combined with another perspective. One respondent, for example, describes the value of ethnic minorities in accessing a more diverse target group within their community work, referring primarily to their network and language skills.

> *'You can feel that organizations who have the goal to create a link with the local community, cannot always do this very easy. But we have an enormous asset and that is Hamza. He knows so many people. Like I said, he grew up there, speaks Arabic, knows a lot of people. For many people he is the organization […]. You can see that certain things… certain questions can be asked easier to someone who embodies trust, has the same roots, the same background.'* (Director, community work organization)

However, the respondent goes on to refer to the importance of societal power dynamics, stating that *'it is also important from a societal point of view to offer people with a migration background - who in any case have less opportunities on the labour market – to create opportunities… or to be able to offer some sort of counterweight.'*

Another leader, however, based on her own experiences as a minority group member, condemns this access perspective and insists on professionalization of her employees in the ability to expand knowledge on both workplace diversity and target group diversity. In doing so, she clearly draws upon a learning and integration perspective.

> *'Ethnic cultural minorities should be able to get other roles than just those who work for the same target group, or those who operate as translators or cultural interpreters. I think that is really import in our organization. Colleagues should not only be able to approach me to give advice about a certain 'cultural' approach. Everybody has to be able to offer counselling because they are professionals. In that sense, diversity should be a common thread throughout the whole organization. In trajectories and also conversations about socially relevant topics. If we discuss things and shape our opinions about them, we can learn a lot from each other and do things that allow us to connect. I always participate in fasting during Ramadan for example and I am not ashamed to admit that. Colleagues handle that with a lot of respect and also take it into account. I think that is important for me as a human being and for my colleagues as well.'* (Director, crisis intervention organization)

The latter quotation shows how an individual leader's own experience as a member of an ethnic minority, in an organization whose governance predominantly aligns with a domestic discourse, can influence how diversity is approached. This finding resonates with Fulton et al. (2019), who show that organizational leaders from marginalized status groups spend more efforts in addressing social equality and diversity. Indeed, the director explicitly dismisses the access perspective on diversity as, for her, it does not do justice to the professionalism of every employee. Moreover, also drawing upon professional standards, she states that every employee should be able to interact with different clients.

3.3. A civic discourse: creating, integrating, and learning structural social change

We have just referred to an integration and learning perspective in an organization led by an ethnic minority member. Our theoretical assumption is that organizations with a civic discourse are most likely to draw upon this perspective. One of our respondents establishes a clear connection between the civic discourse and a learning and integration perspective when arguing that: '*diversity is about making the city and its organizations with the people that live there and use it. To do things together with everyone who is a part of it, with who you are as a person and all your beliefs.'* (Director, community and advocacy organization)

Given its focus on unequal power relations in and outside of the organization, a civic discourse adopts a macrostructural perspective to diversity. Since leaders play an important advocacy role in alleviating poverty, ethnic inequalities, community organizing etc., they may tackle their own organizational diversity in a way that aligns with their mission. A director of a local outreach and advocacy organization explains how creating a diverse workforce at all levels of the organization, and making sure that minority group members raise any issues, is necessary to change the power relations and truly make diversity an integral part of the organization.

A civic discourse also refers to the insistence of the organization on the use of organisational policies which highlight members' rules, rights, and responsibilities. This, as well as the importance of the composition of decision-making bodies, can result in a clearly defined and unwavering diversity policy. While word-of-mouth communication strategies are welcomed, to make the organization known in different communities, formal recruiting strategies are also used (e.g. through a website). Unlike a grassroots discourse, a civic discourse involves a great deal of support for positive action and government incentives to ensure representation. One organization, for example, monitors its recruitment process and does not invite applicants for an interview until applications have been received from minority group members.

However, as attention to power relations is deeply entrenched in these organizations, diversity work is not necessarily reflected in or backed up by a diversity policy. Often, diversity work is seen as part of the organizational mission, which is not only related to, for example, offering welfare assistance, but also to alleviating structural inequalities that ethnic minorities face on the labour market.

> *'In the beginning I was really focusing on the structural dimension of racism and discrimination because I really wanted to tackle that and not so much microaggressions in the organization. It was less frequently mentioned, described and discussed. A lot of the employees who deal with those aggressions tell me they should be able to handle that because it's their job, but no. You take it home with you and it's hurtful so we're going to talk about it. I think that's progress, but sometimes it's also heavy… even though I'm not the victim of racism, but the idea that some people encounter those aggressions in our organization is really difficult for me.'* (Director, community and advocacy work organization)

In addition to achieving representation through active selection of minorities, the leader of an organization with a predominantly civic discourse also refers to the use of fictional cases during

job interviews to assess how candidates think about (reverse) racism, gender and power relations. Furthermore, some respondents also stress a commitment to proactively counter micro-aggressions that employees might experience in the workplace.

4. Conclusion and discussion

Existing literature on diversity shows that conceptions of diversity and proposed actions for social change are still predominantly grounded in root images of 'the firm' (Janssens & Zanoni, 2021). In this paper our aim was to better understand diversity discourses and practices in various nonprofit organizations. While many studies point to the prevailing influence and detrimental effects of a business discourse in NPOs, our research aims to conceptualize diversity beyond merely managerialist understandings of organisational governance, and to show how the organisation's perspective of diversity can be shaped by a wider variety of discourses on governance of NPOs.

The different discourses outlined show how nonprofits make decisions, communicate, and manage personnel, and allow us to grasp more adequately how and why organizations adopt a certain perspective on diversity, and consequently how inequalities can be (re)produced in these organizations. Leaders in organizations with a professionalist discourse, for example, focus primarily on qualifications and thereby reinforce a discourse of colour-blindness and meritocracy. We see however that qualifications are perceived in a broad sense, referring to formal education, language skills, but also to less tangible criteria such as commitment, passion, the ability to understand the organization's 'framework' and identification with the social mission of the organization. On the other hand, leaders in organizations with a grassroots discourse draw upon grassroots principles and perceive fairness as central to the diversity debate. This discourse emphasizes autonomy and the need for diversity to emerge 'organically', rather than being imposed by external actors such as governments. As a result, the responsibility

for integrating diversity is located outside of the organization. Moreover, these grassroots values do not necessary align with more equality, as diversity can (unconsciously) be merely tolerated and accepted, decoupled from any form of action. In this way, organizational leaders can channel 'progressive' diversity claims into a fixed organizational context, thereby strengthening dominant power positions (Swan & Fox, 2010; Tatli, 2010).

A third discourse discussed is the domestic discourse, which was in many instances linked by leaders to an access perspective. While historically marginalized communities are often a primary target group, our research shows that members of these communities are at the same time being used for the benefit of the organization's social mission, often contradicting their moral arguments by imposing a normative assessment framework. Diversity is considered valuable as long as it contributes to either the organizational programme, internal organizing activities or acts as a tool for carrying out diversity work. In some instances, diversity is referred to by leaders as a tool enabling organizations to reinvent themselves. Hence, in many cases these organizations act as an 'enabler' and take a positive stance towards diversity as long as it meets their requirements and fits within their framework. Our study also showed how in some cases tensions can arise, as organizations need difference, but do not see it as fitting with their own structures.

While the organizational discourse is an important factor in how diversity is perceived in an organization, our research also shows that individual leaders' experiences as minority ethnic group members can be decisive for the organizations' approach (see also Lee, 2022). This is not surprising as diversity is often associated with voluntarism, meaning that the work it does in organizations depends on who gets to define the term and for whom (Ahmed, 2007a). This voluntarism can be seen as the consequence of a deregulation of diversity. In our study, no policy regulations or criteria are imposed to nonprofit organizations that enforce them to establish workforce diversity. As a result, leaders adopt diversity initiatives that they see as

fitting with their own beliefs and within the terms of accountability. For example, in NPOs with a civic discourse, we find that leaders who have a strong affinity with diversity-related topics because of their own ethnic cultural background, or leaders in organizations in which inclusion of historically marginalized communities and anti-racism lie at the heart of the social mission, are more likely to draw upon an integration and learning perspective. In sum, the fact of having an affinity or advocacy role in alleviating poverty, ethnic inequalities, community organizing etc., enables leaders to tackle their own organizational diversity in a way that aligns with their mission.

Our research leaves crucial challenges on diversity open for inquiry. Firstly, the context for our research is welfare and sociocultural organizations in Flanders, Belgium. It is safe to say that the nonprofit sector is a complex range of different organizations, all interacting with various actors such as beneficiaries, group members, volunteers, staff, boards, private or public funders, in different (inter)national and regional contexts (Anheier, Lang, & Toepler, 2019; Keevers, Treleaven, Sykes, & Darcy, 2012). Consequently, future research examining how organizations define diversity and how this is intertwined with various (f)actors would be highly valuable. Secondly, more research is needed on the perspectives of multiple actors such as (ethnic minority) employees in these organizations, in order to adequately grasp *how* workplace diversity comes into being in the everyday context of NPOs. We believe that employees in organizations, depending on their position, may hold different discourses about diversity (Pasche & Santos, 2013). Further studies could focus on how organizations deal with the presence of discourses that may cause conflict or competition among different internal stakeholders. Finally, if the nonprofit sector is to fulfil its emancipatory role, research on diversity must examine and broaden its knowledge of the power and historical context in which NPOs operate and how this effects different individuals and groups.

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