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Filtering Diversity

A Global Corporation Struggles With Race, Class, and Gender in Employment Policy

Winifred R. Poster

Washington University, St. Louis, MO

The spread of corporate diversity programs in the past decade has meant renewed attention to the rhetoric of fairness in employment relations. A number of organizational dynamics can derail this project, however, especially at the transnational level. In the author's case studies of a U.S. high-tech firm (AmCo) and its subsidiary in India (TransCo), this happens through a *filtering process*, in which managers disassemble broad themes of diversity and repackage them in more narrow and exclusive terms. In the United States, the discourse of gender is more legitimate, whereas in India, it is ethnicity/race. These discourses of diversity have both positive and negative implications. They are used by managers to divert attention from overt forms of stratification and avoid disruptions in employee relations, yet they also generate a mutual critique between the two firms that can help to overcome the filtering process and achieve a more integrated understanding of discrimination.

Keywords: *diversity; multinational corporation; globalization; race, class, gender; labor*

The term *diversity* in organizations implies a commitment to social justice and respect for disadvantaged workers, yet it can be interpreted in different ways by corporate actors. This article uses a transnational perspective to provide a better understanding of how diversity programs are conceptualized and practiced at the ground level. Based on case studies of two high-tech firms in India and the United States, I observe the following anomalies in their diversity programs. Both firms have strong diversity policies, and both are situated in countries where state governments have proclaimed firm commitments to equality (at least in legal rhetoric). Furthermore, both firms are owned by the same larger company, as they are two units

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of a transnational corporation (TNC). Still, managers in each firm articulate and practice discourses of diversity in narrow and even opposing ways. In the U.S. firm, gender is the lens of diversity policy. In the Indian firm, race/ethnicity is the primary lens for diversity policy. Therefore, I ask: Why is there less commonality in the way organizational diversity is articulated and strategized in these firms? Moreover, what is responsible for rechanneling broad goals of diversity in limited and sometimes counterproductive ways?

In this article, I show how this anomaly is generated by a *filtering process* of diversity discourses. This involves separating particular themes of inequality from others and ranking some as more important for the context at hand. Thus, rather than applying their firms' "master" discourses of diversity, which are broad and inclusive, corporate actors at the managerial level articulate contradictory "situated" discourses, which emphasize single themes of diversity. I will show how these managers use the situated discourses to divert attention from overt forms of stratification. Indeed, quite counter to the broad themes of justice in the master discourses, race/ethnicity is the salient tension according to employees at the U.S. firm, whereas gender is the most pressing tension reported by workers at the Indian firm.

Diversity discourses vary across my firms partly because the institutional environments of the firms differ across India and the United States. As managers confront tensions in their firms, they turn to their institutional environments for a way to "smooth" employee relations (Edelman, Erlanger, & Lande, 1993). I show how the institutional frames of India and the United States represent contrasting views on diversity, despite the egalitarian rhetoric of each state's legal system.

After discussing the literature below, I describe the filtering process in each of the two case studies. This section illustrates how managers transform master discourses of diversity into situated discourses, and which in turn contradict the practices of diversity in each firm reported by employees. The next section analyzes what happens when diversity discourses cross borders and how global relations between the firms (as parent and subsidiary) impact their diversity programs. In the conclusion, I argue that the filtering process provides a deeper understanding of the way diversity programs operate in organizations, and that a transnational perspective is especially effective for revealing the mechanism of how it operates. Finally, I discuss how this approach contributes to scholarly debates about whether diversity rhetoric is ultimately enabling or evasive of agendas for fairness and justice across groups of workers.

Literature Review

Diversity Programs and the Study of Discourses

Diversity is a relatively new theme for organizations, although it has historical roots in U.S. policy (Edelman, Fuller, & Mara-Drita, 2001). It emerged out of a progression

of employment rights programs—starting with *affirmative action*, to *equal opportunity*, and since the early 1990s its current incarnation of *diversity* (Kelly & Dobbin, 1998). The term broadly refers to “fair treatment of employees with different attributes” (Edelman et al., 2001). Organizational strategies and activities for instituting this project usually include a diversity office and coordinator as well as statistical reviews and audits to assess workforce demographics, employee attitudes, glass ceilings, pay equity, and so on (Lobel, 1999). Employees are brought on board through diversity councils and task forces, education strategies like training seminars and sensitizing literatures, and legal programs like internal grievance programs for handling employee complaints. There are external activities as well, like documenting compliance to government antidiscriminatory measures and doing media communications to publicize the corporate image to consumers, shareholders, and so on.

According to some research, these programs are effective in integrating and equalizing the workforce. A study of 138 organizations found that those with “identity-conscious” programs for diversity were much more likely to show improvements in the employment status of women and minorities than the “identity-blind” ones (Konrad & Linnehan, 1999). The presence of diversity initiatives and equal opportunity statutes are also associated with greater likelihoods for hiring a female CEO (Guthrie & Roth, 1999). And in some firms, hiring female managers is associated with reduced gender stereotyping (Ely, 1995).

However, the diversity project is not an easy one. Even well-meaning corporations can have difficulties making it work. For instance, Ely and Thomas (2001) found that having a diverse set of managers may not ensure inclusive and democratic work teams. Lambert and Hopkins (1995) found that having a diverse workforce is not enough to create a sense of community among African American workers. In other words, strategies of using diversity in numbers (i.e., proportional representation) may be inadequate in themselves for changing organizational practices of diversity. For this reason, some scholars have shifted their attention to the interpretive side of diversity—namely, its language and meanings. I use the term *discourse* to describe the power that constructed understandings of diversity have in the context of organizations and their employees.

The Filtering Process and Formation of Situated Diversity Discourses

Diversity discourses can derail the project of organizational equality through a process of filtering (Edelman et al., 1993). Much in the same way that a centrifuge machine spins a mixture of ingredients until some materials separate from and rise above the others, organizational managers may filter diversity discourses for themes of race, class, and gender.¹ Firms may have a master discourse (Goffman, 1974) for articulating their broad goals (especially to the public), yet individual managers may use very different situated discourses when translating diversity objectives into strategy (Goffman, 1974).

There are many examples of this filtering in state employment policies (Blankenship, 1993; Crenshaw, 1989). In the 1960s, equal pay legislation became the language of gender discrimination policy—to equalize women’s wages to men’s. In contrast, equal opportunity legislation from the Civil Rights Act became the language of racial discrimination policy, to expand African American men’s access to primary sector jobs. However, women and people of color faced similar experiences at that time, in terms of exclusion from the primary labor market and lower pay than Euro-American men. Still, each group was slotted into a different policy strategy.

A very similar pattern occurred with the wave of “family” initiatives for employment policy around the late 1980s and early 1990s (Wexler, 1997). The Family and Medical Leave Act provided various kinds of job leave for workers with family emergencies, but mostly targeted Euro-American, upper-class, and married employees. This is because of its limited applicability to large firms (having 50+ employees), permanent and full-time work, and employees who have their own financial resources to cover wages during the leave. On the other hand, the Family Support Act targeted mostly poor, unemployed, single mothers and people of color, given its limited applicability to Aid to Families with Dependent Children recipients with young children.

Although there are some advantages to this filtering process (which I will mention later), the costs are significant for marginalized workers. For one thing, this language can mask the linkages among axes of stratification, namely, the way gender, class, and race intersect (Ferdman, 1999; P. H. Collins, 2000; Poster, 2002). Second, it conceals the way that individuals can experience subordination and privilege simultaneously. For instance, even when diversity initiatives succeed on some levels (i.e., advancing a person of color to a managerial position), they can fail on other levels (e.g., if this individual faces discrimination by gender). Third, the filtering process fails to acknowledge the exacerbated effect of multiple hierarchies for those at the bottom—what some call “double or triple jeopardy” (Ferdman, 1999). For instance, because poor women of color often face inequalities on several dimensions at once, they experience compounded employment barriers (Klein, 1997). Plus, this group often has the least access to policies, either because traditional policies do not address their needs (Lambert, 1999) or because they are invisible to policy makers (as was the case for women of color in the bifurcated Civil Rights initiatives mentioned earlier).

My aim is to show how a similar process happens at the organizational level within corporate diversity programs. For the sake of space, this analysis focuses on themes of race, class, and gender. (However, there are other dimensions of diversity—e.g., sexuality, age, family structure, etc.—that are equally relevant and deserving of further study.) In many firms, the filtering process involves a ranking of race and gender as primary (Ely & Meyerson, 1999; Kossek & Lobel, 1996) while class issues, the needs of low-income workers, and respect for the intersections among dimensions are less common (Klein, 1997; Lambert, 1999). The contours of this filtering process—and also the meanings attached to particular themes—can vary though. Next I discuss how this happens across the United States and India.

Institutional Frames in the United States and India

Diversity discourses emerge in part from the wider *institutional environments*. This includes actors like states, legal systems, media, social movement activists, scholars, professionals, and so on, who take an active role in shaping public discourse on employment issues (DiMaggio & Powell, 1991). These groups use various strategies to exert pressure on firms, some of which are direct (e.g., state policy) and others indirect (e.g., threats of bad publicity). Although these institutional actors may represent diverse and even competing interests, they often produce a common frame of public discourse on a particular issue in a given context. This frame of policy discourse—especially concerning employment rights—can have national reach (Saguy, 2000, 2003).

I focus on the comparative case of the United States and India as countries with reputable commitments to diversity at the state level (Parikh, 1997; Poster, 2001). Just as the U.S. Constitution respects the rights of individuals according to race, sex, religion, national origin, age, and so on, the preamble to India's constitution supports "Justice, social, economic and political; Liberty of thought, expression, belief, faith, and worship; Equality of status and opportunity; and to promote among them all Fraternity assuring the dignity of the individual and the unity and integrity of the Nation" (Nussbaum, 2001, p. 1). Yet at the same time, institutional environments of both countries express very different and often opposing discourses of diversity. Here, I show how the ranking and content of diversity themes vary across the two.

The United States. What is unique about the institutional frame of the United States compared to India is how weakly race appears in employment discourses (Lamont, 1992, makes a similar observation about the U.S. in her comparative studies as well.). Ironically, this is true for both liberal and conservative agendas. The liberal project of rights has been watered down in response to pressure from neoconservative political administrations and an increasingly moderate public. Thus, while the Civil Rights movement in the 1960s and 1970s had effectively positioned affirmative action as the primary means of defining racial employment rights, this rhetoric lost its legitimacy in the 1980s and 1990s (Edelman et al., 2001). This accompanied a sharp decline in public and federal support for affirmative action, as notions of treating people of color "differently"—even to redress past injustices—were no longer perceived as valid (Konrad & Linnehan, 1999). The discourse of race also lost its popularity among conservatives. A "new" racial discourse has emerged over the past few decades that takes the form of a "kinder, gentler" racism and that uses a "laissez-faire" liberal framework to recast notions of social relations and entitlements (Bobo, Kluegel, & Smith, 1997; Bonilla-Silva, 1999). "Whereas whites in the Western world [historically] defended their privileged status vis-à-vis minorities by exclusion, today they defend it by claiming to be for 'equality' and 'fairness' for everybody in the face of massive racial inequality" (Bonilla-Silva, 1999, p. 87).

At the level of the workplace, we see how this shift in rhetoric has led to a “silence” about race relations in employment (Moss & Tilly, 2001). In their interviews with 365 employers representing 174 firms in four major U.S. cities, Moss and Tilly (2001) found managers to be strikingly reticent on the subject of race. The authors suggested that this may be related to “political correctness or fear that the survey would fall in the hands of the Equal Opportunity Commission” (p. 91). They also suggested that for some managers and employees, race is threatening in the United States to talk about. African American female managers in the study report that Euro-American “employers are sometimes intimidated by an uneducated black male” (p. 101), and when confronted with the ones who “act tough,” “they will back away until they can find a way to get rid of them . . . rather than address their behavioral problems and deal with the issues.” Whatever the source, race/ethnicity has lost its salience in the U.S. diversity discourse.

Gender, on the other hand, has had increasing visibility in the institutional frame of employment rights. Historically, gender has been constructed in a way that is less likely to challenge the status quo. For instance, in the post-WWII era, this was done through the rhetoric of motherhood. Protective legislation and similar policies relied on the separate spheres ideology to advance claims for women’s work (Berkovitch, 1999; Orloff, 1993; Skocpol, 1992). Although feminist groups tried hard to undo this discourse in the 1960s and 1970s with campaigns for “gender equity” (equal time, equal access, equal pay, etc.), this focus failed to sustain public policy discourse for much longer than the early 1980s (Burstein, 1995).

Indeed, the popularity of “gendering” employment discourse was recaptured in the 1990s with a new strategy—sex (Williams, Guiffre, & Dellinger, 1999). Several high-profile sex-and-work-related cases came to public attention at this time, largely due to the efforts of various actors who found this an expedient way to further their interests. For instance, the Democrats used the Anita Hill sexual harassment case against Clarence Thomas to oppose his nomination to the Supreme Court, whereas the Republicans used the Paula Jones sexual harassment case against former President Clinton and his affair with intern Monica Lewinsky as fodder for impeachment hearings. Even many feminist groups—who were not oblivious to the potential benefits of such media attention—used this opportunity to advance “sex” as a legal conduit for women’s employment rights (Schultz, 2003). The impact of these diverse yet converging social forces is evident in the state response: Even though such cases had been on the legal agenda since the late 1970s, it was not until 1991 when the U.S. legislature intervened for the first time to provide protections against sexual harassment through passage of the amendment to the Civil Rights Act (Saguy, 2000).

These events had significant repercussions for the workplace: Sexual harassment became a main agenda for diversity and human resource (HR) programs. As awareness of rights regarding sexual harassment spread among female workers, and as the legal profession tagged on with an explosion of sexual harassment cases, organizations

responded with elaborate grievance procedures and sensitivity seminars (Dobbin & Kelly, 2007; Marshall, 2005; Schultz, 2003). The downside is that this proactive support for sexual harassment has come at the expense of attention to other employment issues for women—such as nonsexual types of interactional discrimination or the structural or material inequities of pay, promotions, and so on. In addition, the institutional frame of sexual harassment has had an important impact on diversity programs—it has prioritized “sex” in the discourse of employment rights. A case in point is that women who file legal cases concerning employment discrimination are less likely to lose if their case involves sex (Schultz, 2003).

In sum, whether associated with sex, family, or motherhood, gender is often a safer or easier topic of discussion in organizations than race. Ely and Meyerson (1999) found in their consulting interactions with and scholarly observations of many organizations over the 1990s that

Men and women find it relatively easy to define masculinity and femininity and describe how their organization values the attributes associated with each differently. By contrast, discussions of race tend to be more difficult. In particular, whites struggle to describe the experience of whiteness, even in stereotypical terms, since they take their whiteness for granted. Unlike other racial groups, they have not learned to think of their racial identity as a distinct cultural or social experience. (p. 31)

This is one of the reasons why many organizations focus on gender in their diversity programs rather than race, class, nationality, or their intersections.

India. The opposite pattern is true of India. Here, race/ethnicity is more integral to the public discourse of employment discrimination. The semantics are different in that terms like *ethnicity* and *culture* are more common than *race* and *diversity* (Gupta, 2000a). Furthermore, the criteria for determining ethnicity more often include features like caste, religion, language, region, and even social standing than color and national origin, as in the United States (Bonilla-Silva, 1999; Ferdman, 1999). Curiously, although both societies are diverse demographically, the discourse of ethnicity/race is more integral to the public discourse on employment in India than in the United States.²

Part of the reason is that ethnicity/race has emerged from a historical context of colonialism and nationalism in India. Because British colonial strategy was based on a divide-and-rule principle (even codified in law), the nationalist movement responded by using a counterrhetoric of community, inclusion, and the eradication of social hierarchies (Gupta, 2000b). These themes had a symbolic role in unifying the country against the British and justifying an independent state. When it came time to draft India’s constitution in 1950, *quotas* (or what Americans call *affirmative action*) were quickly legalized. These laws reserved spaces for marginalized social groups (called *scheduled* or *dalit* castes) in state organizations, local political offices,

and some universities. Although many critique the current quota system as catering to privileged agrarian castes rather than disenfranchised groups, there has been little serious (or at least sustained) challenge to the fundamental principles until the recent period of liberalization (Gupta, 2000b). In this way, the notion of employment rights for marginalized groups (broadly defined along ethnic, economic, and caste lines) has been seen as legitimate in India.

At the same time, India's public discourse has deemphasized the validity of gender in employment rights. One reason is the context of economic development. With a third of the population living under the poverty line in India (UNDP, 2001), the rhetoric of "equal access" to jobs has had much less influence within public policy, especially compared to industrialized countries like the United States, where the unemployment rate is less than 10%.

A second factor is the recent shift in political control of the government. Most of the legal gains for women's employment came under previous regimes of the progressively oriented Congress Party (formed by independence leader Mahatma Gandhi and first Prime Minister Jawharlal Nehru). They enacted legislation like the Maternity Act, the Equal Pay Act, and the 1992 constitutional amendment establishing quotas for women in local governments (Dugger, 1999). During much of the 1990s, however, Hindu fundamentalists controlled the national government through the Bharatiya Janata Party. Much of their discourse is centered on a familial ideology and a return to women's traditional roles (Kapur & Cossman, 1996). At the state and regional levels too, Hindu right governments have used such discourses to regress laws on women's employment rights in the law (Fernandes, 2001).

A third reason for the silence on gender in Indian employment discourse is the orientation of the women's movement. Whereas U.S. feminists have used employment discrimination as a means to advance women's rights, this has not been the case for Indian feminists. One reason is the sluggish legal system, which makes the law a less viable avenue for obtaining employment equity (Nussbaum, 2001). Another reason is the size of the labor market and availability of jobs. Because the private sector is still relatively small in this postsocialist nation, seeking employment rights through this arena is less viable.³ Instead, many leaders have directed their efforts toward jobs in government (like the "women's bill" for parliamentary representation; Dhanda, 2000; Narayan, Sheth, Yadav, & Kishwar, 2001). Finally, another deterrent is the image of employment rights presented in the U.S. media. By viewing the treatment of sexual harassment cases in the international news and TV, some Indian women's leaders have come to see these issues as "frivolous," especially relative to other more oppressive inequalities (Feld, 2002). Thus, the silence of gender by women's groups in India is not due to a lack of employment discrimination but because of strategic choices made in their activism.

In this way, diversity themes in India and the United States have varied according to their institutional frames: Ethnicity/race is at the forefront of employment rights discourse in India, whereas gender is more salient in the United States. These frames

also reflect particular meanings of race, class, and gender. Both will be relevant next as we discuss what happens when firms leave their institutional environments. I will show how the master discourse of diversity is easily exported abroad, but the process is more difficult with the situated discourse.

Transnational Corporations and the Transfer of Diversity Policy Across Borders

Transnational corporations are opportune sites to examine diversity policy, as a context where these frames come face to face. Moreover, TNCs represent an increasingly pervasive and dominant sector of the global economy (McMichael, 2008; Peterson, 2003). I will argue that they embody distinctive organizational dynamics that alter the constitution of diversity policy relative to “local” firms.

The study of diversity programs in global contexts and in TNCs in particular is a nascent and growing field (Mor Barak, 2005). So far, the research has been regionally focused on the Global North, with studies of U.S. transplant firms in Europe (Boxenbaum, 2006; Egan & Bendick, 2003; Ferner, Almond, & Colling, 2005; Hill, Jackson, & Martinango, 2006). Some of these studies are optimistic about the transportability of diversity programs for women and ethnic minorities overseas (Fulkerson & Schuler, 1992; Hill, Yang, Hawkins, & Ferris, 2004). Others are more critical, noting a range of patterns among local units like resistance, avoidance, and uneasy accommodation (Boxenbaum, 2006; Ferner et al., 2005). These positions reflect a long-standing debate about the unique dynamics of TNCs and whether they represent a convergence, divergence, or hybridity of employment practices when faced with competing institutional environments (Elger & Smith, 2005; Smith & Meiksins, 1995). Yet, I will show how the development of diversity programs in TNCs involves more than just a meeting and/or melding of two “local” frames.

By focusing on a TNC from the United States to India, I will make several challenges to the existing literature. First, there is insufficient attention to the Global South, which is the destination for a large proportion, if not the majority of, TNC activity. There is particular need for attention to India, which was host to some of the first TNCs of the contemporary period of globalization (Grieco, 1984; Kumar, 1989) and which is experiencing incredible growth with the current waves of outsourcing and offshoring (Carmel & Tjia, 2005; Chanda, 2002; S. M. Collins & Brainard, 2006). Furthermore, some scholars argue that the historical circumstances of colonialism, the greater disparity between urban and rural populations, and the recent widening of global inequalities mean that issues of diversity are more complex in countries of the Global South (“Diversity Management Internationally,” 1996; Poster & Prasad, 2005; Prasad, Mills, & Prasad, 1997; Ratnam & Chandra, 1996).

Second, my cases will show how diversity frames themselves may rest on and emerge from uneven playing fields. Diversity rhetorics represent not only the national differences of the United States and India but the politics and positionalities of those

states in the global economy. TNCs embody these transnational structural relations in the context of a single firm, with the headquarter units representing the hegemony of capital in the Global North and subsidiary units representing the eager but marginalized economies of the Global South. The very fact that TNC head units have the authority to set “diversity” as an agenda for the transplant units, not to mention its definitions and programs, is an indication of this uneven relation (Ferner et al., 2005).

Third, these cases will show how diversity policy develops out of a dynamic interchange among key organizational actors rather than only from a passive response to institutional environments. The emphasis here will be on the role of managers, who have control over the programs and “discretion” (Wilson, 1997) over how to implement policies like diversity. For instance, Boxenbaum (2006) has a fascinating discussion of how transplant managers in Denmark “strategically reframe” diversity policy from the United States to appeal to regional funding agencies for support. Indeed, Edelman and colleagues (2001) referred to this broader process as “managerialization” of the law and employment policy. My cases pose the question of how this managerialization is globalized. If local managers have interests in smoothing relations within firms, we will see here how transnational managers have interests in negotiating relations across firms as well.

The Firms and Their Master Discourses of Diversity

The Case Studies

This analysis is based on case studies of a major computer company in the United States and its subsidiary in India. The parent, AmCo,⁴ is located in Silicon Valley, California. It is a founding company for the high-tech industry in Silicon Valley and has subsidiaries in many nations. It is a *Fortune* 500 firm and has tens of thousands of employees worldwide. TransCo is its subsidiary in India. Its head office is in New Delhi (in the north of India) and its factory is in Bangalore (in the south). It was set up in the late 1980s and has a staff of a few hundred. Although TransCo’s ownership, management, and policies are from the United States, its staff is almost entirely Indian (with a few U.S. expatriates). Both firms have operations involving software development and hardware production. They also have a similar proportion of female workers—roughly 25% to 30%.

Data collection occurred in 1995-1996. Fieldwork was conducted at each firm’s corporate office and one of their factories through observation of work relations, analysis of company documents, and in-depth interviews. Interviews were conducted in English and lasted 30 to 90 minutes. There were 34 interviews at AmCo and 60 at TransCo. At each firm, half of the interviews are from the corporate office and half at the factory. Each sample was randomly selected and balanced according to gender and occupational level. At the corporate level, employees were doing jobs

like management, marketing, engineering, accounting, and so on; at the production level, they were doing circuit board manufacturing and computer assembly. In addition, many informal interviews were conducted with high-level managers at both firms (e.g., presidents, vice presidents, and HR managers).

The Diversity Programs

Both firms are well regarded for their employee policies. Each has been listed in media surveys of the best places to work (in their respective countries). As I will show next, their master discourses of diversity reflect goals of equal treatment for marginalized groups.

AmCo has been on board with diversity for some time. Because it is an older firm, its policies have gone through a succession of stages. AmCo's original agenda of "affirmative action" transformed into one of "competitive advantage," in correspondence with changes in broader political pressures and corporate rhetoric (Edelman et al., 2001). The Vice President of "Global" HR (i.e., overseeing human resource departments for all AmCo subsidiaries around the world) recounts:

About 25 years ago, the diversity office was set up—but it was primarily emphasizing equal employment opportunity at the time. Then the next chapter evolved into affirmative action as the government requirements arose. As a federal contractor, we do X-number of dollars business per year, so we were required to have these affirmative action plans. So, it was primarily a government compliance issue: we're gonna do this so we can pass all the government audits.

About 7 or 8 years ago is when the concept of diversity first came into our minds. It was kind of out of a good citizenship plan. We're gonna do this because we want to be a good citizen. It was kind of morality. Then, there was recommendation in the department that having a diverse set of employees provides competitive advantage to the company. So it's more than just government compliance and being a good citizen—it is good business.

In this way, the sources of AmCo's program are institutional as well as altruistic.

Still, the master discourse of fair and equal treatment of marginalized groups is loud and clear. The Global HR-VP emphasizes these themes as he describes his diversity program:

Diversity is replacing fundamental values, and treating everybody with dignity and respect. It is creating an inclusive work environment where everybody has the full opportunity to become all they are capable of, to tap peoples' full potential. Not drawing talent from just a narrow slice of the potential population, but trying to attract people across the board—by gender, age, sexual orientation, race, and everything else. When we bring them in, there is a minimum of artificial barriers that causes them to be less than they are capable.

[Question:] How do you do that?

A: certainly education. Making sure all levels of the company understand the concepts of diversity and what we're trying to do. Building awareness. B: creating behavioral change. That's fundamentally what we're trying to do—change behavior.

In turn, AmCo's diversity activities include Equal Employment Opportunity Commission compliance assessments, sex harassment grievance procedures, sensitivity seminars for employees, employee–manager forums, diversity councils, sexual harassment committees, and voluntary employee clubs (which African Americans, Indians, and women have formed). Along with these strategies, there are additional programs for improving the structural representation of women and minorities in management, and an elaborate work–family program provides support for telecommuting, job sharing, and part-time work (Poster, 2005).

TransCo's diversity program is newer, only about a year old when I did my fieldwork. This is typical of India, where the diversity trend picked up in the 1990s (Ratnam & Chandra, 1996). To its credit, AmCo provided TransCo with many resources to help them with this goal. They set up a separate office within TransCo's HR department and hired a full-time specialist to work on diversity exclusively. This “diversity manager” has a wide scope of responsibilities—he oversees the diversity offices in all of AmCo's subsidiaries in the Asian region.

Furthermore, AmCo's master discourse of diversity is carried well to TransCo. The trainer in the factory articulates this in describing the goals of her seminars:

We talk about equality, and how to treat people the same. We teach values—trust, respect for individuals no matter who they are, ethics, honesty, and things like that. Some of these things here are to be instilled in people. They go to different schools and learn different things, so we sort of bring everybody to a common ground.

Because the office is newer, the activities are not as developed as those of AmCo. The office was largely in an assessment phase when I did my fieldwork, with activities like employee surveys and statistical analyses of distributions and demographics. However, managers had organized many diversity seminars and already handled a few sexual harassment cases at the factory. Furthermore, because diversity is discussed in the “induction program” for all new hires, most of the staff had formed some opinion on the issue.

The Filtering Process: From Master to Situated Discourses of Diversity

Whereas the master discourses of diversity in these firms are egalitarian and broadly conceived, the situated discourses are much narrower. This is because managers reinterpret

diversity, often by drawing from institutional frames in their environments. The following discussion outlines the discourses of diversity by managers first and then the practice of diversity in employee relations and/or organizational initiatives. This reveals how the filtering process masks tensions among employees in each firm.

AmCo

The discourse. Gender is clearly the main focus of diversity discourse at AmCo when managers set it to practice. The Global HR–VP explains this in the department’s hiring and promotion programs: “[Our] objective is, we clearly need to have in AmCo a better representation of women in higher level jobs. Our numbers aren’t that great, so we need to accelerate the development of women. We need to increase the retention.”

Gender is also the focus of his “behavioral change” activities. The vice president cites a personal example of this, as he had a former habit of bonding with male staff through humor (until a female colleague pointed it out):

Like if I went into a meeting and there’s a man there, and I might say something negative to him about his necktie which is too big. I would never say that to a woman. [It becomes] a spectator sport, and you have to sit there and giggle and have everybody think it’s funny.

Employees note how gender discrimination is also the primary theme of training seminars. A male technician in the factory recounts:

It was about women’s perceptions, and how men see women/women see men, and how they make decisions in different ways. It was a psychological type of thing, like how men are raised, and how women are raised differently, and they see things different.

This emphasis on gendered jokes and interpersonal relations is a marker of AmCo’s diversity discourse (especially compared to TransCo, as we’ll see later).

In contrast, other forms of inequality among employees are less visible in AmCo’s discourse. There is a silence on issues of class, and although race is acknowledged, few managers see it as a pressing issue. A male quality engineer in the corporate office explains:

I could cite some individual examples of racial discrimination, but as a whole, as a company policy, absolutely not. That is one of the reasons why I like this company—because discrimination against anyone is not sanctioned. It is not allowed.

Furthermore, when AmCo managers do discuss race, it is often treated in a homogenizing way (i.e., as a binary category of “White” and “non-White”). The Global

HR–VP, for instance, expresses this in his goal of “improving the retention of people of color.” The problem with this discourse (although admirable) is that it overlooks the complicated and intricate ways racial discrimination exists in the firm, as we’ll see in the following.

The practice. The practice of diversity in AmCo counters this managerial discourse however, especially from the employees’ point of view. To begin with, workers do not centralize gender as a form of discrimination in the way that managers do. In fact, employees often recount how well the firm deals with incidents of gender discrimination. A female engineer describes her experience with this after a case of sexual harassment:

I had a challenging experience a few years ago, when a man touched me inappropriately around the office. And it was handled extremely well by personnel. They took it very seriously, immediately. It was a very unpleasant experience for me to go through the reporting of it. And my manager didn’t deal with it very well—[the one] a couple levels up the ladder whom I reported it to. He went into a little panic, and didn’t know how to handle it. So personnel spent considerable amount of time educating him. AmCo is extremely careful about that sort of stuff.

In the factory, too, sexual harassment is taken very seriously. In fact, when I asked one manager about his general work responsibilities, he replied that a sexual harassment dispute was at the top of his list at that very moment:

Like today I have to deal with sexual harassment. This involved an operator and a technician, on the shopfloor, we call it the process area, and in the break room. She alleged that he made sexual advances toward her, and claimed that she told him to stop several times, but he has not. Someone brought it up to my attention last Thursday, so the last three days I’ve been spending time investigating, talking to the involved parties, and finding out—between myself and the other supervisor, and my manager’s manager in personnel—how we should go about addressing this issue. I think it’s going to be something pretty severe. I don’t think AmCo will tolerate this kind of stuff—could be termination, could be lifetime probation [for the perpetrator].

This reveals another positive feature of AmCo’s diversity policy toward gender (at least at the corporate office): Single incidences of gender discrimination are treated as organizational rather than local so that responsive measures affect more than just the immediate employees involved. A female engineer in the corporate office explains:

Anytime anything is brought up as a sexual discrimination, they address it here immediately. They have large classes, everyone goes, we all hear the same thing, we are all handed the same material to read. It’s addressed right up front, right away. I think it’s really positive.

Table 1
Occupational Distributions by Race/Ethnicity^a (Percentage by Column)

	Total	Management	Executive, Sales, Engineer	Administrator, Secretary	Operator, Technician
AmCo					
Euro-American	32	17	64	50	13
Asian American	44	67	18	50	53
African American	3	—	9	—	—
Chicano(a)/Latino(a)	21	16	9	—	34
Total	100	100	100	100	100
TransCo					
Hindu	83	100	86	60	72
Christian	15	—	14	40	18
Muslim	2	—	—	—	9
Total	100	100	100	100	100

Note: ^aSlightly different indicators are used to represent “race/ethnicity” in each firm (“national origin” in AmCo and “religion” in TransCo). This is partly because of the differences in stratification systems and their meanings in India versus the United States, as discussed in the text.

This is not to say there is an absence of gender inequality at AmCo—only that it is less overt than other forms of discrimination (Poster, 2001). And while this is partly attributable to the positive steps taken by the diversity office, it is also related to the limited way that AmCo managers conceive of gender discrimination. By interpreting it narrowly as sexually demeaning communication or harassment, managers neglect other (nonsexual) forms of discrimination and more importantly, those that intersect with race and class, as I show next.

Indeed, a more overt tension in AmCo is race/ethnicity. Demographically, AmCo is very heterogeneous. A majority of my interview sample (almost 70%) is *not* Euro-American: 44% are Asian American, 21% are Latino/Chicano, and 3% are African American (Table 1). Moreover, a large proportion of these employees are international—as either transmigrants themselves or children of immigrants. Workers in my sample have backgrounds in the Philippines, Guam, Puerto Rico, Mexico, Vietnam, Japan, Malaysia, Iran, and India. Furthermore, they mention other colleagues in the company from Hong Kong, Korea, China, Africa, and Pakistan. This is typical of Silicon Valley, as many high-tech firms employ up to 30 different national origins in one setting (Chun, 2001; Hossfeld, 1990; Louie, 2001).

Also typical for the Silicon Valley context is a stratification of occupations and salaries along racial/ethnic and gender lines. Euro-Americans in my sample dominate the coveted high-skilled technical and professional jobs at the executive level (Table 1), such as engineering, sales, and finance (64%). Asian Americans and Latinos on the other hand dominate production jobs (87%, combined, Table 1). They

Table 2
Monthly Wages by Race/Ethnicity and Gender

AmCo	Total (N = 34)	Women (N = 17)	Men (N = 17)
Euro-American	4,732	5,450	4,373
African American	5,000	—	5,000
Asian American	3,562	3,026	4,097
Chicano(a)/Latino(a)	2,759	2,992	2,175
Total	3,766	3,500	4,017
TransCo	Total (N = 60)	Women (N = 29)	Men (N = 31)
Hindu	608	405	786
Christian/Catholic	283	302	246
Muslim	64	64	—
Total	547	372	729

Note: ^aWages at TransCo have been converted from rupees, at a rate 34.5 rupees per dollar (for the year of the data collection).

also earn lower wages on average than Euro- or African Americans (Table 2). At the very bottom of the wage hierarchy, Latinos earn about half what the Euro-Americans do. Furthermore, the triple impact of race, class, and gender is apparent through the Asian American women in the sample as they hold the greatest share of production work and have wages lower than the men in their racial/gender group.

Diversity policy has helped to undo some aspects of racial and gender inequality. For example, midlevel managerial positions have become open to multiple ethnicities. In fact, Asian Americans in my sample dominate the managerial and supervisory jobs (67%), and Chicanos/Latinos share the remainder with Euro-Americans. Yet, the greatest gains of diversity policy have been by Euro-American women. Around the time of my study, women were breaking through the upper tier of the glass ceiling. As one corporate office employee explains:

AmCo has several women Vice Presidents that have just come in the last year or two— we had the first woman V.P., and then another woman V.P. We also have more women General Managers. We have more to go, but AmCo is trying to balance that.

Furthermore, since my fieldwork was completed, the firm appointed its first (Euro-American) female CEO (also one of the few in the *Fortune* 500). Another credit to AmCo's diversity policy is in reducing the wage gap by gender. Women in my sample earn on average 87% of men's wages, which is notably larger than the national average of about 79%. However, the Euro-American women in my sample have benefited most from this trend once again. They earn more than any other gender/racial group (Table 2). In this way, the firm has been comparatively more successful in combating inequality by gender than race.

Moreover, when it comes to interactions between employees, the practice of diversity challenges the managerial discourse even more clearly. Racial discrimination and/or conflict are repeated themes by employees at AmCo. This happens in all types of jobs. Managers, for instance, talk about a promotion barrier for people of color. A Japanese American male supervisor trying to move to upper management observes:

People who are White tend to climb the social ladder faster. Being a minority, I lack that exposure. I don't belong to this "old boy networks." It's that talk and political savvy—they talk the same language. So if you don't talk the same like them, it's hard for you to break into their circle. I see some of those people in that little circle go up faster—I've seen two cases of it.

Transforming the language of gender discrimination into one of race (i.e., the "old boy networks"), this supervisor notes how the upper tier of the job hierarchy is exclusive to Euro-Americans. Chicana managers report many intersecting forms of discrimination as well. For one Chicana supervisor, the experience of discrimination is

not about gender . . . it is mainly from nationality. Once an engineer came and said a joke that had something to do about Mexicans and low riders. And it was a joke, but to me it was a very bad joke. It caught me by so much surprise, you don't even know how to respond.

Moreover, some workers from marginalized backgrounds report discrimination by people in their own racial/ethnic group. Another Chicana employee in the corporate office explains how:

Gender discrimination tends to come from our more macho-type managers that have been here a long time. *I noticed it even more in Mexican-American managers that we have.* I hated to see that—especially in them—but I definitely did.

Thus, the sources of discrimination at the corporate level are not simply by "Whites" but by people of color against each other.

At the production level, there are racial tensions as well. These dynamics take a different form than those in the corporate office though because of their intersections with class dynamics. For instance, competition over permanent versus temporary jobs on the shopfloor leads to divisions and rivalries among ethnic groups. According to a Puerto Rican female operator, "back-stabbing" and interworker surveillance are normal behaviors here:

We have so many of us, and everybody wants the same thing, so there's a lot of back-stabbing. If you have one person trying to get in here, they'll come up with all kinds of things. If they see something you did wrong, right away they'll run to the supervisor

and want everybody to know about it. Some people would do anything to get ahead. But it's really something typical that goes on when there is competition for a promotion, to get up to a higher level.

Other workers claim that these dynamics are organized on racial lines. A Chicana operator recounts:

Like Philipinos, they would all stay together in one group. And they would just watch everybody else and see what they're doing, to see who they could go and tell on. You can tell they're watching. Anything you do. You come back from break late, the boss would know about it. 'Cause when my boss tells me something, I was figuring, "How does she know?" She's not there, she doesn't see. So, there is always somebody telling something.

The relevance of this example is not so much the identity of the perpetrators but the reaction of the management. Although it is possible managers are unaware of these events, some employees believe that managers are passively allowing them to continue: "They know, really. They're aware of it. Because there's a lot of that going on. It's always there," says a female operator. Either way, there is a lack of attention to racial/ethnic conflicts on the shopfloor.

Finally, diversity policy itself is also more problematic here because of intersecting axes of inequality. Workers faced with the greatest racial tensions also have the least access to diversity office activities and programs. At the factory, for instance, training seminars are given to the upper-level staff but not the lower-level production workers. A Euro-American male technician explains how he was shown a video on diversity during "a staff meeting of managers, engineers, and technicians. But I don't think that they showed it to the operators." (Contrast this to the previous cases in the corporate office where gender discrimination seminars were given to "everybody" after a single incident.) Similarly, employee-management councils are less accessible to workers at the bottom of the hierarchy as only corporate employees in my sample reported having this opportunity.

Some employees even argue that such policy in the factory sends "mixed messages" to workers about diversity. This issue came up as a factory supervisor was discussing English-only rules on the shopfloor:

There's a lot of mixed messages. We [as AmCo managers] want to have a diverse workforce—male, female, of all different ethnicities. But then, when it comes to their [employees'] culture, and they find it is easier to speak in their own language, then we really don't want that to happen. It's very confusing. We're all confused. I can understand why people find it hard to understand, because I would probably be very confused too. It's hard to figure out where you draw the line. Right now, no one knows.

Rather than respecting or even taking advantage of this multiculturalism, factory managers strive for uniformity in language—which reflects the interests of the dominant

ethnic-racial group. In this way, AmCo's master discourse of inclusiveness is undermined by site-based employee policies. As this language policy only exists in the factory (as far as my research found), it again represents intersecting themes of class and race.

In sum, the case of AmCo reveals how diversity discourses operate on multiple layers. Underneath the master discourse of inclusiveness in the firm's formal policy, there is a situated discourse constructed by managers that more closely reflects the U.S. institutional frame. At AmCo, this discourse filters gender ahead of race and class (as well as their intersections). Given that gender is among the least overt tensions among employees, however, the situated discourse helps to divert attention from problematic aspects of the work environment.

TransCo

At TransCo there is a similar filtering process but the ranking and content of themes are rearranged: Ethnicity and race are central to diversity discourses while gender and class are silenced. Once again, this filter more closely resembles the institutional frame of India than the corporate discourse of diversity.

The discourse. The difference in TransCo's diversity discourse is apparent when asking managers about gender relations. The president says: "The women thing I have not had. We have a correct ratio of women as exists in India in terms of the number of women working." The HR-VP repeats:

Diversity or sexual harassment or gender issues per se, we don't believe that we have any such issues in India. Our snap opinion: our president told us that there was really no need to get into any of this because it wasn't applicable.

Even the expatriate manager from the United States (who is a Euro-American male) agrees: "Is there prejudice against women? Yes. Does it exist here? I don't think so. I don't think that it does in TransCo, with the management team that we have."

Instead, managers funnel their diversity discourse into one of race/ethnicity. A sales manager explains: "Diversity—if you are referring only to women—no, it's not really a problem here. But diversity when you refer to social structure in India, it's a very different topic altogether. That's a very, very different issue." Another agrees: "See, here the diversity issue which could be more important would be people belonging to one particular religious group or linguistic group or from a particular province—rather than the women and men ratio." These race/ethnic cleavages create barriers to mutual understanding among employees, according to the firm's diversity trainer:

Here it is a real diverse group. You find people from all different backgrounds—different incomes, different castes, different languages, different traditions. You may be sitting with a production worker who comes from a very poor family, or someone who

eats a different kind of food from what you eat, or speaks a different language. Because the backgrounds are so different, you may be sitting with somebody who cannot relate, or doesn't know what you are talking about.

The practice. Yet, the scale of ethnic diversity at TransCo is not as great as these managers suggest, and neither does it have the consequences for employee relations they imply. To begin with, there is considerable homogeneity in the backgrounds of the employees. A majority of workers in my sample are Hindu (83%, Table 1), most are from large cities (78%), and all speak Hindi and/or English fluently.⁵ This limited workforce diversity is related to structural dynamics of the organization. For instance, a lower-level executive in the HR department sees deficiencies in the hiring process:

Here, the hiring manager and the staffing function, they have to keep in mind the diversity. If you have two prospective candidates, and if both are competent—both the persons are the same—my suggestion to the organization is, *why not employ a person of the community which the organization doesn't have, so that minorities are also taken care of.*

One important contradiction in hiring concerns religion. In India, the largest religious minority (and one facing significant social marginalization) is Muslim. Yet, this group is hardly represented at TransCo (3%) and falls behind other religious minorities, which are smaller at the national level (i.e., Christians, 12%). Thus, it is curious why managers are not acting on what would be an assumed “target” in their recruitment, especially given the way they centralize race and ethnicity in their diversity discourse.

Moreover, ethnicity does not appear to create conflicts among employees at TransCo, especially to the extent that it does at AmCo. There were few reports of ethnic tension concerning language, regional background, food preferences, and so on in my interviews. Not a single manager listed complaints of ethnic discrimination among employees or against management. And although I expected some ethnic tension between the corporate office and factory (given their locations in regions of India—north vs. south—that have been historically contentious), this was not the case either.

Instead, the overt cases of discrimination at TransCo are related to gender. An example is wages (Table 2). The gender gap in my sample is enormous: Women earn only half of men's wages on average (51%), which is far greater than that of AmCo (13%). There are also glaring forms of gender stratification in the job hierarchy. At the time of my fieldwork, TransCo had no women in upper management—at either corporate or factory sites. A male executive explains how this is not typical for AmCo and its units around the world:

I was very surprised to learn that in AmCo-Worldwide, there are so many women as managers, because in India I have hardly seen any. There was one lady manager here who has gone back to the U.S. now. I noticed [the difference] when I went to AmCo in

Singapore and Hong Kong. There are so many women around, but you just don't see that in most of the Indian companies. Generally it is a mind-set that we have. If you look at the senior management we have, it will still take a lot of time before women to get into the senior management, where they can make an impact on this thing.

Indeed, a personnel executive reaffirms:

When you are thinking of equality, it doesn't really happen here [italics added]. We have women employees at the junior management, but hardly any women employees in the managerial cadre or for that matter, middle management cadre—which is very, very unusual. It shouldn't happen that way.

Indeed, in my sample, the only female manager was a lower-level supervisor in the factory.

Similarly, the interactional types of gender discrimination at TransCo are much more direct and blatant than those of ethnicity. For instance, a female marketing executive in the corporate office describes how a male manager belittled her in front of a client:

One of our dealers was here, and they have a large organization. He was just passing by in the corridor and he said, "We have a marketing meeting. Are joining us?" But our account manager was with him, and he said: "Don't be ridiculous. Before inviting people like her, you should ask me whether we require it. Come on, do you think she should be there in a meeting like this?" The dealer is an external person who respects me—or respected me 'til that time—for what I was doing for the organization. And he just turned around and said, "Oh! I didn't know this person is so inconsequential." These kinds of incidences have happened very often.

Indeed, male managers are quite candid about discriminating against women in hiring and promotions. This is especially true when it comes to specific jobs like management or finance:

I remember when we had a vacancy in accounting that this point was brought out that why not take a woman. *At the end, a woman was never in contention for it, frankly.* One was this reason—it is unsafe for women basically. You would not expect a woman to go back at 12 at night because you cannot do that kind of thing. The other was if she was to have a baby, then 7 months go on, 8 months go on, without her.

Furthermore, gender tensions tend to escalate or linger on because TransCo lacks the infrastructure of seminars, trainings, and priority-one managerial attention to discrimination and harassment cases that AmCo has.

For these reasons, female workers are most likely to contest the managerial discourse of inclusiveness at TransCo. This female engineer in the factory is an example:

They say in AmCo women and men are equal, but I don't see here an opportunity for a woman to grow. I would like this place to have more women supervisors, rather than a very few which you can count on your fingers, who are also leaving. I am leaving this

place too. One more thing I want to point out is, at the top management level, they should not have a feeling that women are second earners in the family. It should not come in pay scales, promotions, increments, etc. Although AmCo is open [in terms of employee relations], such a trend should not be there. Such a feeling should not be there.

In the corporate office as well, a female sales executive agrees: "Most people at TransCo do believe that [when it comes to diversity] 'This is all talk. They don't mean it,' which is not a happy situation I guess. In an organization like AmCo, it stands out more."

Aside from neglecting gender, the managerial discourse also disregards tensions of low-income workers. One of these is wage stratification. This is apparent when comparing monthly wages for top and bottom workers in my sample (by broad job categories): TransCo managers earn on average 12 times as much as operators. Moreover, the disparity is much greater than that of AmCo, where managers earn closer to 2 times as much as operators.⁶ In fact, the triple impact of race, class, and gender on job rewards is also more clear-cut at TransCo (Table 2). There is a greater concentration of marginalized workers at the bottom of occupational and wage hierarchies. As we look at the operators on the shopfloor, we find that it is only here that we find employees who are at once ethnic minorities (Muslims), female, and temporary. These workers have the weakest pay and security conditions and also the least access to diversity programs, just as in AmCo. Factory managers have a strict policy of excluding temporary workers from most trainings and seminars, out of fear that the firm's information will be leaked to competitors when employees leave (Poster, 2005).

In sum, there is a filtering process at TransCo that favors race/ethnicity as a theme for diversity. This managerial rhetoric, which closely reflects local institutional frames, helps to divert attention from forms of inequality that are more problematic, like gender discrimination and its intersections of class and race. As this filtering process differs from that of AmCo, this makes for complicated transnational relations between the two firms.

The Transnational Clash: Diversity Discourses Across Borders

Up to this point, we have considered the firms independently, ignoring their relations as a larger transnational corporation. Yet if AmCo is TransCo's parent company, why aren't the diversity programs of the two more alike? To answer this we must consider the context and process in which diversity policy is transported across borders. If the firms have to manage and respond to their external institutional environments, they also have to respond to each other.

One factor is the decentralized organizational structure of the firm globally. Instead of the typical top-down arrangement between TNC units, AmCo yields a certain degree

of authority and decision making to its subsidiaries. Their overseas policy is to wean off expatriate managers and hire local staff. Moreover, AmCo leaves much of the policy implementation to local managers: "Our strategies and practices, we say as a corporation, they don't have to be the same in different countries. But they must be consistent with the ethical values," says the Global HR-VP. Thus, even with the decentralization of authority, AmCo managers still convey their situated interpretations of diversity through these "ethical values" (and other more direct ways as well, as shown below). From TransCo's side, managers accept many of the directives from the Global HR department at the U.S. office but also challenge and bypass others. For instance, while TransCo managers are subject to periodic reviews and visits by the Global HR-VP, they also ignore his recommendations when considered irrelevant. The result of this corporate structure, then, is that both firms have some agency in developing their diversity programs, and are able to resist a simple transfer of policy from one to the other.

The diversity programs are divided even further by a second factor in the transnational context—the positionality of firms in the global hierarchy. Locations of AmCo and TransCo across the Global North and South, rather than just across national borders, yield a particularly wide disparity in their institutional frames. This disparity provides a structural and narrative source of opposition in their debates about diversity. In this section, we see how the politics of globalization (often echoing rhetoric in the media) enter discourses about fairness and equality, e.g., hints of neo-colonial rhetoric from AmCo, and hints of anti-globalization rhetoric from TransCo. At the same time, these global positions also provide firms with a positive alternative viewpoint of diversity, allowing managers to step outside of the limitations of their national institutional environments and conceive of diversity in broader terms than they are used to. Ultimately, these transnational interactions between AmCo and TransCo are both contentious and reciprocal, with costs and benefits for their employee programs.

Mutual Evasion Through Global-Local Discourses

A downside of this relation is that managers use transnationalism as yet another tool for evading master discourses. In attempt to deflect criticism and pressure about their narrow diversity practices from their partner TNC, managers in both firms introduce rhetoric of globalization. This constitutes an additional filtering process, with situated discourses this time taking the form of "global" versus "local" diversities.

At the head office, AmCo managers overinflate their policy to the "global" level. Rather than recognizing the possibility of multiple meanings across different countries, they articulate a universalist view of diversity. As the Global HR-VP explains, the firm is striving for the status of "a truly global company," and the "the tell tale sign" of this is having policies that are "transplantable" anywhere:

Our corporate culture moves well with managers—they *want* to adopt the standard ways. Over time they move toward it. Employees embrace it too. *The words seem to*

translate into different languages. The meanings of the words seem to fit. It fits with different religions, it fits with different cultures. The core values are very transplantable.

Although this rhetoric sounds benign, it indicates a lack of awareness or interest in the way that AmCo policies conflict with other interpretations and experiences of diversity.

TransCo managers do the opposite. They overemphasize the “locality” of diversity discourses and programs. Rather than seeing any common diversity issues transnationally, they characterize employee relations as nationally specific. Furthermore, the patterns are presented as mutually exclusive, so that one country’s policy is inherently unsuitable for another. This is illustrated by the statement of a TransCo manager: “Frankly, in my opinion *diversity is a more of an American issue than an issue here.* But you know, it’s been raised to the dimension of a global issue in this company, so we have to address it.” The rhetoric is also used to describe specific themes of diversity. Gender, for instance, is dismissed as incompatible to India because it is American. TransCo’s HR–VP states: “You know, gender is a very live situation in the United States, but I don’t think it is such a live situation in this organization over here.” A male sales manager adds homophobia (and for that matter, the mere presence of gays/lesbians in the workplace) to the list of uniquely American issues:

Some of the diversity issues which are more relevant to the U.S. are not relevant to us. For example, their talking about the number of women percentage—I don’t think that is a big issue in India. There is no discrimination on pay just because a person belongs to a particular gender. The other thing which I found is sexual orientation—it is not relevant in India. I don’t think we have any significant population of the other-orientation people. Those are typical American issues or Western issues at this point of time.

Similarly, AmCo’s policy concerning race and ethnicity is seen as American, given its goal of remedying or handling a context that supposedly has little racial/ethnic heterogeneity: “A lot of diversity issues that are being addressed today [in TransCo’s program] are more a reflection of the lack of diversity in the U.S. context,” as a male finance manager says; whereas such a policy is unneeded in TransCo because: “The scope of diversity is larger here than you would find in the West,” says the factory diversity trainer.

The cost of this discourse then is how it diverts managerial attention from mutual recognition and achieving balance in diversity policy across the firms. With its global rhetoric, AmCo fails to acknowledge differences between the firms. This includes the localized constellations of race, class, and gender and how different forms of discrimination are overt at each site (i.e., race/ethnicity at AmCo, gender at TransCo). On the other hand, with its local rhetoric, TransCo avoids acknowledging commonalities among the firms. This includes the special diversity needs of low-income workers, the magnified forms of discrimination against minority women in the factories, and the problematic or counterproductive effects of some of the

diversity programs at each firm. Instead, both AmCo and TransCo use the excuse of global versus local orientations to dismiss accountability to the other.

Mutual Benefits From Clashing Discourses

At the same time, though, there are benefits to this transnational relationship. From the head office, AmCo plays a crucial role in introducing the agenda of diversity to its subsidiary. By their own accounts, TransCo HR managers were originally hesitant about the idea of diversity and admit they were unlikely to pursue it without the urging from AmCo:

Diversity is one thing which was never on top agenda for the company, 'til about a year and a half back. We as a company never looked at diversity as a concern to worry about in India. And the management team had heard about the concept of diversity, but we never worked on it consciously. But recently, we said, ok, since the company [AmCo] has taken a worldwide initiative to look at these issues, we'll examine them. So one of our objectives for this year is to examine and see whether there are any issues of diversity or gender biases of that sort at TransCo.

Ironically, the agenda of diversity is relatively uncommon among private firms in India, despite the strong focus on social justice for marginalized groups in state policy and public discourse. One TransCo manager (who is a U.S. expatriate) recounts: "Here, it isn't the same as the States. There's not a multicultural, diversity kind of impetus going on." With this barrier between public discourse and organizational practice then, TNCs may be helpful in providing the extra push to move the diversity project forward.

From the other direction, TransCo provides AmCo with a useful critique of the strategy and content of its policy. In particular, it can help expose the situated discourse embedded in AmCo's policy and the consequences of transferring it to subsidiary units. In some cases, TransCo's discourse also provides alternative strategies for constructing a global policy through local interventions rather than through proxy experiences from the head office.

One example is the terminology of the program. Contrary to aforementioned AmCo expectations that the "words" of its policy will "fit" in different locations, TransCo managers describe confusion in interpreting the term *diversity*. When finally deciding "Now let's start focusing on diversity," as the HR-VP recounts, they found that "most of us in the management team didn't understand what diversity was." As mentioned earlier, the term itself is part of an HR agenda that emerged from a particular historical context in the United States (which Edelman et al., 2001, outlines so insightfully). So, although it may seem obvious to U.S. firms that the language of an HR program will be transferable overseas, it is not necessarily the case.

Another example is the implementation of diversity policy abroad. AmCo's "global" diversity program has surprisingly little to do with anything international,

in substance or in venue. For instance, AmCo trains subsidiary managers in diversity policy by bringing them “home” to the corporate headquarters. Yet, TransCo managers suggest that by conducting the training sessions at offshore sites, their employees would be able to join the discussion as well. An additional problem with AmCo strategy is how the content of the training seminars is based on the lens of AmCo’s diversity experience. When asked if any of the topics addressed diversity policy in other countries, this TransCo manager responded: “No, they do not. They talk of what’s happening in the U.S.” Alternatively, TransCo managers orient their diversity program around respecting the unique patterns of employee relations and stratification in different regional settings:

What we are saying is, let’s be sensitive to the diversity requirements of each country. Let’s ensure that we have a diverse workforce, and let’s ensure that there is an all-inclusive work environment in each country—but *for all the diverse groups that exist in that particular country*. The U.S. has issues of minorities, issues of women, and so on and so forth *which don’t exist in other countries*. In Canada, there could be some different issue; in Brazil, there could be a different issue; in Penang, there could be different issue. But what’s important is we’re conscious of those issues, and we’re doing the right things to take care of them.

This approach attempts to shift the strategy to a middle ground, in which there is some degree of localization within the global framework of diversity.

Finally, what TransCo discourses have to offer AmCo is a widening of specific diversity themes. For instance, TransCo staff challenge AmCo’s binary oppositions of race into categories of “White vs. non-White,” or even “majority vs. minority”:

We are such a diverse nation that I really find it difficult to identify a majority in this country—*whereas in the U.S., it’s a much more pronounced situation of Whites-and-the-rest*. India is really a country of minorities. Who do you call “majority” here? If you take these three combinations into account—your language, your religion, and the area you come from—there’s no clear-cut majority. Okay, you can call Hindus a majority, fair enough. But alright, now you say: “Which Hindus—Punjabi Hindus [from the northern state of Panjab], or Tamilian Hindus [from the southern state of Tamilnadu]?”

Although this manager glosses over some important details in this Indian scenario, he raises a critical point regarding the complex organization of race/ethnicity. Intersections in dimensions of inequality (e.g., religion and regional origin) can lead to cross-cutting cleavages in social categories (e.g., Punjabi vs. Tamilian Hindus). This caution against oversimplifying race/ethnicity to one dimension or category can be applied to other societies as well. In fact, it would be especially helpful for AmCo given the contradictory way that race plays out there—for instance, how some women experience more benefits than others by race (e.g., Euro-American women vs. Asian American women) and how some minorities experience discrimination from each by gender (e.g., Chicanos against Chicanas).

Similarly, TransCo experiences could help undo AmCo's narrow definition of gender as sex in their diversity programs. This issue arises as TransCo employees are sent to the U.S. office for diversity training and become surprised by the content of the exercises. This TransCo manager attended a session in which the main type of discrimination against women was presumed to be sexualized jokes and vulgar pictures:

I had a very interesting experience in the U.S. recently. We were there in June, all the managers from my group, and we had two workshops on diversity. And they painted a picture: You had a conference room, and it is all male company, and a new lady manager has joined, and obviously there is a kind of resentment amongst the male members. So someone had drawn a vulgar picture on a piece of paper. Then the lady walks in. So the [facilitators] ask us, "How will you handle that kind of a situation?" And we went around the room, and somebody said, "I will hide it," and so on and so forth. *For me, the problem was that I can't even visualize a situation in India where it will happen.*

Many of my interviews with female as well as male staff at TransCo support this view. For instance, these subtle or indirect cases of gender discrimination (like drawing and hiding sexual pictures behind women's backs) are less commonly reported in TransCo than blatant forms of discrimination (like disparaging women to their faces). In this sense, TransCo staff might be able to broaden the range of gender inequalities, or at least fill some gaps, in the topics of AmCo's diversity seminars.

Thus, although the relationship between AmCo and TransCo may be contentious, it is also reciprocal in many ways. Both firms help the other (or could potentially do so): AmCo has spread the agenda of diversity to a corporate environment where it was relatively uncommon while TransCo recasts the content and strategy of the diversity program so that it respects multiple—and transnational—interpretations.

Conclusion

The spread of corporate diversity programs in the past decade in the United States has meant renewed attention to the rhetoric of fairness in employment relations. However, organizational dynamics can derail this project, especially at the transnational level. In this article, I have shown how this happens in case studies of a U.S. high-tech firm (AmCo) and its subsidiary in India (TransCo). It involves a filtering process, in which managers disassemble broad themes of diversity and repackage them in more narrow and exclusive terms. The filters vary across AmCo and TransCo as they are embedded in different institutional environments: In the U.S. case, the discourse of gender is more legitimate, whereas in the Indian case, the discourse of ethnicity/race is favored. Interestingly, Boxenbaum (2006) referred to this cross-national reinterpretation of diversity as an act of "translation," bringing up the

imagery of socio-linguistic interpretation. I would add that the translation process may operate by filtering race, ethnicity, and gender.

My analysis also calls attention to the multiple levels of diversity discourse that may exist within firms and the processes by which they are created. Even if an organization has a master discourse that advocates fair treatment of diverse employees, managers may also construct situated discourses underneath it that reflect their own interests, or simply that are disadvantageous to workers. In addition, this study has revealed the value of a transnational perspective for uncovering the process of filtering. This is important because managers in any location are often unaware that their diversity initiatives reflect—and are limited by—the institutional frames of their national contexts. Yet, these cases show how a transnational perspective can provide an alternative view of diversity experiences, and it can motivate managers to act on diversity strategies for which they were previously hesitant.

There are several limitations of this analysis that hopefully can be addressed in future research. As a case study, it reflects only a very small picture of the diversity experiment. AmCo is a very large *Fortune* 500 firm and more likely to have a stronger diversity program than other organizations. (Most employees in fact, at least in the United States, work in small firms that typically have fewer HR supports.) AmCo and TransCo are also high-tech firms, which are common as transnational corporations but are less so among local firms in both the United States and India. Indeed, perhaps because they are well represented in the *Fortune* 500, high-tech firms have generally been favored in the case study research on diversity and other employee programs.⁷ In this sense, the literature would benefit from a view of other industries and organization sizes to assess the broader applicability.

This study also has some methodological limitations. The interview samples are small and, although randomly selected, represent only a fraction of the employees in these firms. Data collection was incomplete in some cases, for instance on indicators of organizational stratification (e.g., caste in TransCo). For these reasons, I temper my generalizations regarding “the practice” of diversity (although this is less central to my analysis than the “discourses” of diversity). Finally, a limitation of the TransCo case study in particular is the age of its diversity program. Because it was less than a year old during my fieldwork, I was not able to look at the outcomes of policies (i.e., after it had a chance to implement structural changes in the organization). Longitudinal studies would be useful in this regard, especially for determining how diversity policies in TNCs translate into practice. See Kalev, Dobbin, and Kelly (2006), for instance, for an interesting analysis of the effectiveness of various kinds of diversity programs.

Still, these case studies illuminate scholarly debates about the relative benefits and costs of diversity rhetoric in the following ways. First, like the skeptics, I find that diversity discourses can represent a managerial strategy for evading equal treatment of workers (Edelman et al., 2001; Kelly & Dobbin, 1998). In their studies of the practices of individual managers and the written publications of industry officials, Edelman

et al. (2001) found that diversity rhetoric is often used as a way to smooth employment relations, by avoiding disruption and maintaining the status quo.⁸ In my case as well, managers use their diversity discourses to deflect criticism of existing tensions and ensure minimal upheaval in their policies. We can see this in the construction of the situated diversity discourses in both firms and how they emphasize themes that are different (and much less contentious) than the ones described by workers—at AmCo, managerial rhetoric is gendered even while employee reports focus on ethnic/racial discrimination; at TransCo, managerial rhetoric is racialized even while employee reports focus on gender discrimination. In both cases, class inequalities and their intersection with race and gender are generally ignored by management.

My study also elaborates on the work of Edelman et al. (2001) in revealing an alternate mechanism and/or effect of diversity discourses. They found an expansion in diversity categories as managers diffuse the language of diversity to the point that it is no longer relevant for legal employment discrimination standards. For instance, corporate actors broaden themes of “inequality” (e.g., race, gender, age, disability, etc.) to those of general “difference” (e.g., dress, communication style, geographic origin, etc.). Ultimately, this process can protect privileged workers rather than the marginalized ones (e.g., when a rural White male is favored for a job over an African American urban male on the basis of promoting geographic diversity). As an extension of this research on evasions, I find an opposite managerial strategy in my study—a narrowing of categories to the point that they only apply to one particular group (of course, still not the most deserving one). Although both patterns (expanding and narrowing) have the effect of undermining diversity goals, each reveals a different strategy for deflecting patterns of organizational stratification. Future studies should consider both dynamics.

In support of the other view on diversity rhetoric—represented in the hopeful or optimistic accounts—I also find that diversity rhetoric can be enabling for the fair treatment of employees. Ely and Thomas (2001) argue that organizational actors are more likely to produce an effective strategy for diversity when they adopt a particular “cognitive frame” of equalizing relations and respecting marginalized groups. This is evident in the case of AmCo, where diversity programs have improved the representation of women in managerial positions, reduced the gender gap in pay, and yielded positive experiences for employees regarding policies of gender discrimination and sex harassment. In accordance with this cognitive frame theory, the case of AmCo shows how these successes are inextricably linked to several key discourses that (a) centralize the diversity agenda in core functions, (b) encourage open discussion, and (c) value the input of disadvantaged groups of workers. My elaboration of Ely and Thomas’s theory is that the filtering process can intercede in this process. At AmCo, *all* groups of marginalized workers do not benefit *equally* from these diversity discourses and outcomes. Rather, it is primarily employees who are privileged by the filtering process—namely, Euro-American women, in my case—who tend to experience positive effects of the policy.

Finally, this study encourages further transnational analyses of diversity programs. As mentioned earlier, the literature on diversity policy in TNCs is heavily overrepresented with cases in the Global North. Yet in cases like mine, involving multiple units of a TNC that cross the North/South divide, transnational politics become a salient feature of the rhetoric. The positioning of managers in each firm within the global economy shapes the construction of diversity discourses: AmCo officials invoke the rhetoric of “globalness” to overinflate the universality of their policy and to evade alternative definitions of diversity raised by their units in other parts of the world; TransCo officials use the rhetoric of “localness” to overinflate the uniqueness of diversity in their context and to avoid acknowledging common issues of organizational stratification across national borders. This shows how Edelman et al.’s (2001) “diversity-as-evasion” process can be magnified on a global scale, between firms in different countries. This case also shows how the managerialization of employment policy becomes even more complicated within transnational contexts as managers have simultaneous interests in retaining their autonomy relative to parent firms abroad while trying to maintain the status quo with employees at home. Diversity policy then becomes the symbolic focal point for expressing tensions managers have with these various global and local actors.

At the same time, this study reveals a unique benefit of global corporations for diversity programs. They have at their disposal an opportunity in their transnational relations to elucidate the filtering process and to undo its narrowing effects on diversity programs. Indeed, even the “clashing” discourses of the two firms generate a mutual critique that managers can use to overcome the filtering of diversity themes and to achieve a more integrated understanding of employment discrimination. On one hand, AmCo introduced the agenda of diversity to TransCo. In fact, TransCo managers admit they would not have initiated their diversity program without the prompting from AmCo. On the other hand, TransCo managers offer a wide range of strategy suggestions to AmCo, which include expanding notions of ethnicity beyond binary categories of White/non-White, expanding notions of gender beyond sexual harassment and jokes, and broadening the global diversity training program so that seminars for foreign managers are not based on the experiences of U.S. employees alone. Thus, just as Ely and Thomas (2001) talk about the benefits of respecting and valuing differences among employees, the same can be true for organizational units across national borders, as they represent another level of diversity in themselves.

Notes

1. See Gupta (2000a) for an excellent comparative discussion of these terms in India and the United States. I use the term *race/ethnicity* to be respectful of the varying ways that social divisions are constructed across both nations.

2. See Lamont (1992, 2000) for a similar discussion of how social environments shape national discourses of race, in this case among professionals and working-class men in the United States versus France.

3. A smaller percentage of women (20%) hold jobs in “formal sector” organizations (whether private or state owned), relative to those who work in the “informal sector” (e.g., agriculture or home-based enterprises; about 80%). Some feminist scholars, however, argue that the lack of focus on employment discrimination in the private sector is itself a contributing factor to women’s unemployment and their relegation to more precarious types of work (Viswanathan, 1992).

4. Company names in this study have been changed to preserve employee anonymity.

5. This analysis unfortunately omits caste level, which has relevance for social stratification in India. My focus, however, is not so much a detailed accounting of inequalities within firms as it is a comparison of broad categories across firms. Also, it is important to note some other diverse features in my sample. For instance, these workers represent several regions of India: Maharashtra in the west, Bengal in the east, and Andhra Pradesh, Tamilnadu, and Kerala in the south. Many employees are from small cities or towns (12%) and rural villages (10%) instead of big cities. There are even a few TransCo employees with international backgrounds, like immigrants from Malaysia and employees who worked or studied in the United States. This leads to a certain degree of linguistic diversity as well, with at least six languages represented among the workers. Still, it is arguable whether or not this diversity is any greater than that of AmCo.

6. This is attributable to another set of globalization dynamics that affects the two firms—the heightened flexibilization of labor in countries in the Global South—which I discuss in another article (Poster, 2005).

7. Examples include Xerox (Bailyn, 1993; Sessa, 1992), Digital Equipment (Walker & Hanson, 1992), IBM (Hill, Jackson, & Martinango, 2006), Microsoft, Apple, and Oracle (Williams, Guiffre, & Dellinger, 1999).

8. Some scholars see “work–family” discourse as having the same effect as those of “diversity”—as a way for firms to avoid accountability for larger employment problems (Gonyea & Googins, 1996; Kelly & Dobbin, 1999). Gonyea and Googins (1996, citing Hall) said this discourse enables firms “to look progressive by working on family issues without confronting important issues of discrimination—based not just on gender, but also race, ethnicity, and other kinds of differences” (p. 70).

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Winifred R. Poster teaches at Washington University in Saint Louis in women's and gender studies and international studies (http://ascc.artsci.wustl.edu/~women/wgs_w_poster.htm). She is interested in the impact of the global information technology workforce on women, ethnic minorities, and low-income communities around the world, especially South Asia. She is currently working on a book for the University of Chicago Press called *Global Circuits of Gender*, which compares women's experiences in high-tech firms in the United States and India. Her research has appeared in journals such as *American Sociological Review*; *Social Problems*; *Gender & Society*; *International Journal of Politics, Culture and Society*; *Journal of Developing Societies*; and *Social Politics*.