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## **Localising the Diversity Discourse through Multi-level Analysis**

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## Localising the Diversity Discourse through Multi-level Analysis

### ABSTRACT

A multi-level framework of analysis- macro, meso and micro- is used as a mechanism to localise a discourse of workplace diversity in New Zealand and Australia contexts. At a macro level the demographic patterns, historical and socio-political influences, legislation and labour market all affect the societal positioning and organisational voices of historically disadvantaged groups. Influences are more variable at meso levels but examples are drawn from organisational culture and surveys of attitudes to EO /diversity. Micro levels factors include individual characteristics and dyadic interaction between supervisors and employees. The discussion relates local discourses to the conference theme. *Key Words: multi-level analysis, EEO, diversity, Australia, New Zealand*

### INTRODUCTION

The managing diversity discourse has been criticised for adopting a universalising discourse (Jones, Pringle & Shepherd, 2000; Strachan, Burgess & Sullivan, 2004). Notably the critique comes from ‘down under’, not the U.S. or U.K. This paper considers how the local Australian and New Zealand (NZ) context could be taken into account to create locally-based diversity discourses.

The conference theme focuses on pragmatism, philosophy and priorities. In the discussion I rearrange the order to be more congruent with research process viz., philosophy, pragmatism and priorities. In conducting research our philosophy is apparent in our ontology and epistemology. It varies, perhaps from a functionalist world view located in a capitalist ethos; a perspective from Kaupapa Maori intertwining of spiritual and material worlds (Smith, 1999); or even feminist epistemology which views organisations through a lens of gendered power relations. Pragmatism dominates in business schools with calls for application and action; while emphasizing managerial control. Within a resource constrained world priorities are set with respect to time, material resources and power.

The language of diversity has multiple underpinning philosophies meanings with Ragins and Gonzalez referring to diversity as a “slippery construct” (2003: 125). The meanings indicate varying philosophical positions towards workplace diversity. Managing (evoking action by the managerial elite), valuing (evoking openness and egalitarianism), and tolerating (signifying a reluctant acceptance) diversity, have all been used (Prasad, Konrad and Pringle, 2006; Stockdale and Crosby

2004). Duplicity in the meaning of managing diversity is invoked by the image of a Trojan Horse (Jones & Stablein, 2006). The visible symbol of the Horse acts as an advocate to further the capitalist enterprise, while sheltering activists working for social justice.

The conceptual framework I use to localise the diversity discourse comes from discussions of multi-level analysis in organisational studies. A feature of organizational phenomena such as managing diversity is that processes are linked across several levels. Within organisation studies macro and micro levels are commonly differentiated. In macro approaches the organisation is the analytic entity (House, Rousseau and Thomas-Hunt, 1995) with the role of human agency de-emphasized. In contrast, the micro level examines behaviour and attributes of the individual and small group dynamics within organisations (Ragins and Gonzalez, 2003). This bifurcation in the research results primarily from the researcher being trained in micro (psychology) or macro (sociology) level analysis. Conducting research from discipline silos such as psychology and sociology (Skaggs and DiTomaso, 2004) has diminished our ability to move between levels of analysis. If organisational models are developed without consideration of micro and macro factors then they will be necessarily limited, leading to incomplete and perhaps inaccurate propositions (Yammarino and Dansereau, 2004). House et al. (1995) mounted a compelling argument for a bridging meso level to develop more mid-range explanatory theories. The meso level can viewed as the mezzanine (1995:73) where both macro and micro factors and their potential interactions are taken into account. Using a multi-level approach to research gender and organisations, Fagenson (1990) developed a three level model of gender (or individual)-organisation-society. She advocated the use of multiple and interactive inquiry across levels in a way that parallels the framework of this paper.

A multi-level framework that confines the largest unit of analysis to organisations provides no place for the country context. Historical legacies and societal factors affect organisations as much as individual actions. Multiple level inquiry is needed to create local explanations for areas of resistance and the shifting power relations between social groups. Without awareness of the socio-politics of groups within a nation the explanations of workplace group dynamics is lacking. The objective of this

paper to use a multi-level framework, of macro, meso and micro levels, to localise the diversity discourse. The following schema will frame the discussion.

- Macro: The level of nation - demography and socio-political arrangements;
- Meso: The level of organisation - cultures and structures;
- Micro: The level of individual attributes, dyadic and small group interactions.

Illustrative examples of analysis at these three levels will be drawn from the Australian and New Zealand context.

## **MACRO LEVEL FACTORS**

Broad comparisons of the NZ and Australia workplace environment have been discussed in an Asian context (Patrickson & O'Brien, 2001) and a gendered context (Cotter, 2004) and more widely in the comparative industrial relations literature. Some country characteristics are noted but there has been a lack of a systematic framework. Understanding macro level influences are crucial to localising and putting diversity considerations into organisational practice. A framework has been recently developed to analyse major country factors (Pringle, 2006), namely: demography, historical, socio-political, legislative and labour market conditions. These factors will be exemplified within an Australian and NZ context before parallel discussion will be made of meso and micro factors.

### ***Demography***

Projected changes in population fuelled the serious examination of how a demographically diverse workforce could impact on organisational effectiveness. Despite that early emphasis, population demography is rarely taken into account when analysing organisational diversity. Yet within democratic systems the numbers and proportions of different social identity groups have clear implications for power. The link between demographic and societal power is not causal but population proportions provide indications of identity groups' societal positioning.

Both NZ and Australia have witnessed a marked increase in women's participation in paid work such that it now approximates population representation (Patrickson and O'Brien 2001). Women now have entered professional and managerial positions to the extent that the glass ceiling is positioned at the level of senior management and Board representation (McGregor and Fountaine, 2006). Within NZ and internationally, there has been prominence given to the success of women in public positions e.g. Prime Minister, Governor-General, Chief Justice. Yet as Cotter (2004: 102) notes, "ethnicity pays a factor in gender discrimination" in NZ. Compared to population demography there is an over-representation of Pakeha (white) in management and professional occupations compared to Maori and Pacific Island women. Conversely, Maori and Pacific Island women are overrepresented in unemployment figures (Statistics NZ, 2006). Within Australia analyses of women participation is not commonly broken down by ethnicity (De Cieri and Okelans, 2001) partly due to the population dominance of white Australians (approximately 88% refer to Table 1).

The ethnic composition of the two countries means a different emphasis in how workplace diversity implemented. At the last NZ census (2001) the ethnic composition was: 71% European; 15% Maori; 7% Pacific Peoples; 7% Asian; <1% other ethnic groups ([www.stats.govt.nz](http://www.stats.govt.nz)). Compared to Australia there is a high proportion of indigenous people (15.5% Maori) and other people from collective-based cultures (Maori and Pacific Islanders, 7%). The most obvious difference in the ethnic demography of Australia is the low proportion of Indigenous peoples (2%) and other non-white Australians (10%). These demographic differences play a major part in which voices are heard.

### ***Historical and socio-political influences***

Both countries are former British colonies which has influenced government, the legal system and major institutions, such as education and health. Both countries share an ethos of egalitarianism by the founding colonists<sup>1</sup>. In both countries women gained the vote relatively early in compared to UK and

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<sup>1</sup> Although it should be noted the first European settlers in Australia were convicts and their carers, while in NZ they were middle class aspirants seeking an escape from the class system and greater economic and social opportunities.

US. The pioneering culture in a rugged physical environment and geographic isolation helped to mould an independent and self-reliance national culture.

A major differentiating feature between the two countries has been the place of the indigenous peoples and the development of ethnic relations. The historical legacy in NZ has meant that the diversity discourse is influenced by the cultural coherence and sustained resistance of the Maori to assimilation. The strength of the bicultural discourse is due to the comparatively large proportion of Maori in the population, plus the founding Treaty of Waitangi. Following the signing in 1840, there was confiscation of land by the colonisers and although many of the principles of biculturalism have been violated, the principles underlying the Treaty are visible and debated today. For example, in 1985 the Waitangi Tribunal became empowered to settle claims for land, fisheries and cultural resources retrospectively. The Treaty continues to be contentious but it has formed the basis of “a discourse between Maori and Pakeha around the notion of partnership (Jones et al., 2000:367).

The history of the race relations in Australia is very different with early colonisation associated with near genocide of the Aboriginal people, followed by active attempts by the government and societal institutions to annihilate the culture. It is more than 20 years since the ‘white Australia’ preference was part of immigration policy, yet recent unwelcome treatment of refugees and asylum seekers has reinforced the perception of Australian as having more volatile race relations than in NZ. The most recent Australian government regime has shown the socio-political environment to be wary of claims for indigenous rights. An attempt to neutralise the “increasingly contested policy domains of multiculturalism and racism (towards Indigenous Australians, migrant groups, and most recently, refugees)” (Sinclair, 2006:514) is revealed in a workplace diversity strategy emphasizing economic benefits<sup>2</sup>. Emphasis on the business case diverts attention away from power inequalities and histories of oppression (Linnehan and Konrad, 1999). Initiatives such as ‘Harmony Day’ demonstrate the degree to which tactics of brand marketing have been invoked to minimise attention to inter-group inequality

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<sup>2</sup> Paul Keating introduced the Australian variant on the business case for diversity in the term ‘productive diversity’ in a speech he made as Prime Minister (Sinclair, 2006:514).

and the potential for conflict. A complementary strategy of focussing on gender inequality in EO masks the relative power positions of ethnic groups.

For a variety of historical and socio-cultural reasons, inequality within the local diversity discourse varies between the two countries. In Australia, greater emphasis is on the position of women while in NZ inequality is embedded in discussions of biculturalism and ethnic relations.

### ***Legislation***

The evolution and broad pattern of legislation of Australian and NZ shows a similar pattern, although the structure of government is different. In Australia, government is multi-layered, creating a legislative labyrinth between Federal and State directives. Within both countries the worse excesses of discrimination have been effectively banned from workplaces through anti-discrimination legislation initially passed in the 1970s and expanded and updated in the 1980s and 1990s<sup>3</sup>. Anti-discrimination legislation acts as a foundation for equal employment opportunity (EEO) legislation that can take a variety of forms dependent on the underlying philosophy (e.g. whether liberal or radical, Kirton and Greene, 2005) and the degree to which organisations are proactive. An EEO philosophy around inequality and disadvantage has been an important precursor to diversity initiatives.

Within NZ the business case for diversity has not gained the traction shown, for example, in the U.S. Public sector organisations fall under EEO legislation and reporting responsibilities are couched in a philosophy and language of inequality rather than business advantage. As private businesses are outside of the legislative mandate they are somewhat removed from the responsibility for action. The NZ EEO Trust survey reports (2005) that 20% fewer private sector organisations had an EEO/diversity strategy compared to public sector organisations. The differing legislative requirements between sectors has meant that managing diversity is raised as a private sector approach (Jones et al., 2000).

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<sup>3</sup> In NZ, the Race Relations Act 1971, Equal Pay Act 1972, Human Rights Commission Act 1977, were combined into the Human Rights Act 1993, and has 13 categories as the basis for discrimination (Deeks & Rasmussen, 2002). In Australia, Commonwealth (Federal) Government Equal Pay Act 1969, Racial Discrimination Act 1975; Sex Discrimination Act 1985 and Federal Human Rights Commission Act in 1981 (Cotter, 2004; De Cieri & Okelans, 2001)

On the surface, EO legislation in Australia has the potential to have a stronger influence with legislation applying to all organizations (public and private sectors) employing more than 100 people. However, analyses of the annual reports over the years has demonstrated that many organizations complied with only the minimal standard of legislation (Strachan et al., 2004). Amendments to Australian legislation increased the emphasis on women (1999 legislation is entitled Equal Opportunity for Women in the Workplace Act) although officially the target groups also include Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders, 'non- English speaking people' and people with disabilities (Strachan et al., 2004). There has been a weakening of compliance requirements due to a conservative political shift combined with active lobbying by business (Hede, 2000). A 'managing diversity' discourse has been imported as a voluntarist HR practice. Thus in Australia managing diversity is likely to be grafted onto organizational EO policies and implemented within the organization through HR departments because of the legislation, the employment relations climate, and the relative societal positioning of women and other EO identity groups (Strachan et al., 2004).

### ***Labour Market***

Contemporary labour market conditions affect workplace diversity, for example, they are a strong factor in recruitment decisions. If the level of unemployment is high or the economy is in recession, then there is less pressure on organizations to hire members from historically disadvantaged groups. Both countries are experiencing shortages of skilled labour and have the dual agenda of immigration and educative initiatives to address skill shortages. Unemployment is not a priority issue in either country. In NZ it is the lowest for three decades (3.9%, Statistics, NZ, 2006), yet 'making the most of a diverse workforce' rhetoric has not overcome discriminatory hiring, particularly against immigrants.

Historically union action has been strong in both countries. Union activity is moderately strong in NZ, partly due to the Labour Government which introduced the Employment Relations Act in (2000) reinstating a primary negotiating role for unions in workplaces. Unions were strong in Australia but industrial relations is undergoing a seismic shift with even the right to union membership and the

previously taken-for-granted employee conditions being questioned (ACTU, 2006). With equity issues coming under the responsibility of managers then “unions are all but being written out of EEO and MD agendas” (Strachan et al., 2004:202) and this is likely to continue in the current industrial relations climate.

Analysis using these suggested macro factors is presented as a summary table (below). It lists important features of the NZ environment and more tentatively suggests some factors that may be important for a local diversity discourse in Australia.

**Table 1 Macro Analysis for Localising the Diversity Discourse**

<b>KEY MACRO FACTORS</b>	<b>NEW ZEALAND</b>	<b>Implications Workplace Diversity</b>	<b>AUSTRALIA</b>	<b>Implications Workplace Diversity</b>
<b>Demography<sup>4</sup></b> <b>Majority:</b> <b>Minority groups:</b>	72% white 15.5% Maori 7% Pacific Island 7% Asian	Strong indigenous presence	88% White Aust. (incl Europeans) 3.5% Asian 2% Indigenous 1.8% Sth. European (20% popn born overseas)	White dominance  Emphasis on NESB (non-English speaking background)
<b>Historical</b>	Colonisation Treaty Maori-Pakeha  Govt. involved e.g. education, health	Bicultural relations	Colonisation Aboriginal genocide 'White' policy Govt. involved e.g. education, health	Assimilation Multiculturalism
<b>Socio-political</b>	Egalitarian ethos Women's rights Maori renaissance Labour Govt.	Focus on race/ethnicity  Erosion of collective	Women's rights Multicultural Conservative Federal Govt.	Focus on gender relations  Strengthening individualism

<sup>4</sup> New Zealand: Statistics, NZ [www.stats.govt.nz](http://www.stats.govt.nz) Accessed 5 July, 2006.

Australia: [www.une.edu.au/campus/chaplaincy/uniting/links/diversity.pdf](http://www.une.edu.au/campus/chaplaincy/uniting/links/diversity.pdf) Accessed 18 June, 2006.

<b>KEY MACRO FACTORS</b>	<b>NEW ZEALAND</b>	<b>Implications Workplace Diversity</b>	<b>AUSTRALIA</b>	<b>Implications Workplace Diversity</b>
<b>Legislation</b>  <b>Current:</b>	Single Parliament Anti-discrimination EO public sector Work-life balance Pay equity		Federal/State/Senate Anti-discrimination EO all orgs>100 Focus on gender Work-life balance	Variable - Federal & State legislation
<b>Labour market</b>	Moderate Union action Skilled labour shortage Immigration focus Low unemployment		Unions (Collective voice) under threat Skilled labour shortage Immigration focus	

## **MESO LEVEL FACTORS**

Organisations and companies are at the meso level but having an important impact at the interface of the macro and meso levels is globalisation. The increasing international focus of many firms has advanced the diversity agenda and is commonly noted as part of a business case rationale. As managers are required to manage a culturally different workforce in a unfamiliar milieu their awareness of difference is raised. Foreign owned multinational corporations (MNCs) have also advanced the agenda for human resource practices where management of diverse groups becomes part of managerial performance. Yet there is a need to consider the functioning of MNCs in conjunction with macro contextual factors discussed above. Two common ways global variations have been examined is through the use of specific organisational case studies and a comparison of country specific legislation with United Nations Declarations (Mor Barak, 2005). While a focus on globalisation has extended the diversity discourse across a variety of societal structures and cultures, it has largely omitted considerations of the significance of power relations relevant in the local contexts.

It is difficult to generalise organisational practice within and between countries at the meso level. Consequently the examples used will note EEO/diversity practices as reported in broad surveys of

organisations. Additionally, case studies of specific organisations provide evidence for the importance of organisational cultural factors when constructing a local diversity discourse.

### *Organisational Culture*

Organizational cultures shape diversity dynamics, for example, through the relationships between the hierarchical structure, diversity policies and the enforcement of practice. Senior management commitment is crucial for any organisational action including diversity initiatives. This translates into pragmatics such as providing resources for data collection and monitoring, training in diversity awareness, EEO/diversity co-ordinator. A non-supportive culture is a key counter-point to progressive policies and senior management endorsement. Even when there are clear lines of accountability, sabotage or non-compliance with directives take place where staff do not agree with the policy or implementation styles (e.g. case in Jones et al., 2000).

There is a plethora of organisational diversity cases studies in book collections (e.g. Cox and Beale, 1997; Kirton & Greene, 2005; Konrad, 2005; Stockdale and Crosby, 2004) but they tend to be teaching tools. They provide a description of organisational cultural factors and enable readers (primarily students) to potentially analyse organisational diversity issues. There is also the consultant advocacy area where the recipients of best practice awards provide material to further argue for a local construction of diversity practice (EEO Trust 2005). Referring specifically to Australian landscape Sinclair (2006: 513) notes that “detailed case studies of diversity management within particular industries and organizations remain relatively rare”. The same comment can be validly applied to NZ. Most research-based case analysis does not investigate the organisations as a unit of analysis but takes a particular line of inquiry e.g. family friendly policies and practices within an organisation. As a consequence the connection between meso level factors such as a supportive or unsupportive culture and employees experiences of diversity practices is not explicitly studied. The impact of organisational culture and subcultures within business units on diversity practices is an area ripe for inquiry.

### *Organisation Surveys*

Recent information on NZ attitudes and practices come from the EEO Trust Diversity Index (EEO Trust, 2005) that is designed to gather information about implementation of EEO/diversity in NZ organisations on an annual basis (since 1999) and is composed of a voluntary sample of EEO Trust member and non-member organisations. In 2005 the report included 487 NZ organisations that together employed 20% of the workforce. Readers will have noted the nomenclature used by the EEO Trust of 'EEO/diversity'. This was first used in 2005 and is indicative of how diversity is perceived. Reported reasons for adopting EEO/diversity strategies and policies are not rooted solely in the business case of diversity but may be summarised as - ethical, regulatory and economic. In both Australia and NZ, business benefit reasons were rated lowest. In NZ, major reasons for having EEO/diversity strategy or policy were social responsibility, senior management commitment, enhance reputation in community, attract and recruit best talent, statutory/legislative requirements, and finally business benefits. Three main benefits reported from EEO/diversity initiatives in NZ organisations were: lowering of staff turnover, improved recruitment, and matching of staff characteristics to the NZ marketplace (EEO Trust, 2005).

As noted earlier the legislation has created the opportunity for EEO/diversity to be stronger in Australian workplaces. In one study, 91% of the 32 Australian organisations surveyed had a diversity or EEO strategy in place compared to 86% of similar organisations in NZ . This EEONA<sup>5</sup> survey reported that managers (72%) were more accountable for diversity outcomes than in NZ (EEO Trust, 2005). In a parallel Australian survey, the reasons for having EEO/diversity policy was due to recruitment then reputation in the community (EEONA survey cited in EEO Trust, 2005). However, systematic analysis of the annual reports over the years has revealed that the emphasis is less on practice than the existence of policies (Hede, 2000; Strachan et al., 2004).

A strong legislative environment and a history of moderate to strong union environment has resulted in the conceptualization and practice of EO and managing diversity as intertwined. This local

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<sup>5</sup> [www.eeona.org/](http://www.eeona.org/) Equal Employment Opportunity Network of Australia (2005) Moving Ahead on Diversity and Equality Survey. Non-random voluntary sample of 32 organisations. Sample type is similar to EEOTrust survey.

discourse is congruent with a definition of diversity outlined by Prasad et al. (2006) that creates a conceptual bridge linking equal opportunity (and its discourse of inequality and injustice) with the business case basis of managing diversity.

## **MICRO LEVEL FACTORS**

Micro analyses of organisational processes directs the lens to characteristics of individuals, intra-group dynamics, and key dyadic interactions, such as between supervisor and employee. As individuals, managers play a primary role in the implementation of positive diversity practices and senior managers play a key role in organisational change. For example, a human resource manager may be relatively helpless in raising the priority of diversity issues if a senior manager is unsupportive.

Analysis of organisational demography has been important to understand intra-organisational processes in workplace diversity. Within organisational demography the most common approach in diversity research has been relational demography which makes the assumption that demographically similar people will establish positive relationships more easily. Much of this research has focussed on the dyadic relationship of the supervisor and the employee (Linnehan, Chorot-Mason & Konrad, 2006; Ragins, Cornwell & Miller, 2003). Typically the ethnicity and gender of the supervisor and employee are investigated as independent variables, correlations created and subsequent regression analyses predict supervisors' attitudinal and behavioural outcomes (Chorot-Mason, 2004; Linnehan et al, 2006).

Similar assumptions are made in the analysis of group or team dynamics. A commonly reiterated finding used to support organisational diversity initiatives is that ethnically similar and gender similar groups are more cohesive while more diverse groups provide more creative outcomes (Cox & Stacey, 2001). This rubric of findings is tempered by research reporting less cohesion, greater conflict and poorer communication within diverse groups (Jackson, Joshi & Erhardt, 2003). More interpretive research approaches have interviewed both supervisors and their employees to gather and compare attitudes to EO and diversity policies and practices. A recurring finding (Liddicoat, 2003; Leung,

2006; Water & Bardoel, 2006) is the gap between the management knowledge and employees' lack of participation in policy development and ignorance of company policies.

Within Australian and NZ good examples of the role of micro level dynamics come from work-family research. In fact much of the recent discussion of EO/diversity implementation has evolved into a work/family or work/life focus. Before practice can occur employees need to be aware of relevant policies and the usual practices of the organisations. In a recent NZ survey employees knew that their employing organisations prided itself on EEO or that they were the recipients of work-life awards, but they were not aware of any specific policies (Leung, 2006). Access and permission for leave is at the delegated level of supervisor or team leader (Liddicoat 2003; Pringle and Tudhope, 1996) and here lies the weakest link in implementation - the employee-supervisor dyadic relationship.

The tendency for a fragmented approach to implementation is not confined to Australasia but is prevalent in the practice of managing diversity more widely. Kirton and Greene (2005) have developed a descriptive typology of minimalist/partial, compliant, comprehensive and proactive to describe implementation in UK organisations. A survey of NZ organisations (Leung, 2006) found that most practices would place the organisations in the compliant category, with any action largely confined to recruitment practices. This local enactment of diversity is basically a translation of EEO – getting people from diverse backgrounds into the organisation. The fragmented organisational outcomes are also underscored by a research approach that focuses at the micro level and omits any organisational analysis which extends into structural and cultural analyses.

## **DISCUSSION: PHILOSOPHY, PRAGMATICS AND PRIORITIES**

The rationale for implementing diversity in workplaces comes strongly from macro factors with local diversity discourses developing in tandem with pre-existing EEO legislation. There is a broadly a similar ethos to managing workplace diversity in Australia and NZ with a parallel emphases on social justice and the business case. The economic agenda takes precedence in business while in government organisations it is an ethos of social responsibility. This divergence is emphasized in NZ with

differential legislation applying to the two sectors. Due to legislative requirements organisational policies are more likely to be about EO, non-discrimination and grievance procedures. Into this milieu of equity and rights came the voluntarist discourse of managing diversity. Within businesses asserting managerial rights complements a contemporary political ideology aimed at creating an environment of reduced government regulation.

Pragmatism is a valued cultural characteristic in Australia and NZ, reflected in the ordering of the conference themes. At a societal level an emphasis on action and practical outcomes are evident at meso and micro levels. Managing diversity is perceived as more proactive than EEO where advocates use business language based on competitive advantage, market congruence and avoidance of HR compliance costs. Within the NZ public sector the debate on EO is no longer constrained to the stance of advocacy but has shifted to a discussion of implementation (Burns & McNaughton, 2001). The EEO Trust survey of NZ managers (2005) reports 'best practice' compliance with EEO/diversity principles as: action in recruitment, pay equity, training (e.g. non-biased selection) promotion, appraisal. In the Leung (2006) NZ survey some managers were aware that it was not practical to take US models into the local environment. Additionally they recognised that bi-culturalism had a role in understanding of EEO, particularly the positioning of target groups. Adopting managing diversity as part of EEO initiatives may be a local strength long-term, as a diversity model closely aligned with business case rationale is located within managerial privilege (Sinclair, 2006) and has less sustained traction because it is economically based. Overall, there is a greater distinction between EO and managing diversity in the US literature than in local discourses.

A stumbling block to implementing workplace initiatives is evident in priority setting. Replication of a NZ study exploring managers understanding of EO and MD after 12 years found discouraging consistency in the findings. Gender, managing diversity and ethnic issues remained on the bottom of HR priorities (Leung, 2006), even in the face of skill shortages and historically low unemployment. Work-life balance issues have become the positive benign face of equity action within organisations, perhaps because they serve an organisational agenda more than benefiting individual recipients.

In conclusion, I have argued in this paper that applying a multi-level analysis to the diversity discourse can provide a more balanced evaluation of the rationales for organisational action. The multi-level framework enables a guide for inquiry at the macro, meso and micro levels. The application of the proposed framework enables actions to be tracked at the levels of nation, organisations and individual. Multi-level inquiry provides a means of strengthening the analysis of the evolution and interdependence of historically disadvantaged groups within the local context.

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