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J Soc Sci, 27(2): 111-121 (2011)
PRINT: ISSN 0971-8923 ONLINE: ISSN 2456-6756
DOI: 10.31901/24566756.2011/27.02.04

A Theoretical Approach to the Experience of Diversity Management: Mead Revisited

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KEYWORDS Leadership. Diversity. Diversity Management. Organisation. Symbolic Interaction

ABSTRACT The growing importance of managing workplace diversity necessitates investigating leadership style as a component of diversity management experience. The article described the interactionist viewpoint as an underpinning theory in the study of leadership style as a component of diversity management experience. The employee experience of diversity management is interpreted through symbolic meaning. The individual is constantly reacting to an organized community in expressing himself and attitudes involved are gained from the group, but the individual has the opportunity of giving them an expression. Symbolic interactionism stresses the form of interaction that emerges from a particular situation. Leaders play a pivotal role in establishing the character and nature of the organisation experienced by employees. The leaders of organisations are tasked with differentiating their organisations through greater efficiencies in performance, within a changing environment in which nationality, colour, religion, ethnicity, disability, gender, sexual orientation and generational differences are key elements of the diverse workforce.

INTRODUCTION

This article introduces symbolic interactionism, systemised by George Herbert Mead (1863-1931) and Herbert Blumer (1900-1987), in the understanding of leadership style as a component of diversity management experience in the workplace.

To achieve the objective of this article, the sociological symbolic interactionist theory is used to analyse leadership styles as a component of the subjective experience of diversity management.

Industrial sociology is concerned with "the type of society" within the context of which work and organisations exist. "The societal, economic and political organization of industrial society, and the perceptions, attitudes and experiences of its members, in a complex way" (Parker et al. 1997: 24).

Mead's theory of the emergence of mind and the social process of significant communication form the basis of this approach. "Social action", Mead suggested, includes all human behaviour when and insofar as the acting individual attaches a subjective meaning to it (Wallace and Wolf 1980: 221).

Schwalbe (2005) asserted that the application of symbolic interactionism examines the meanings, emotions, interaction and communication within a local and linked global context. From an external perspective, globalisation and increased migration have intensified the diversity of the labour force. Diversity influences social behaviour in global organisations. Diversity experience is addressed from an interpersonal, individual level, through the construction of the self in relation to the group. The self awareness of individuals leads to them comparing an individual to the norms of the group (Leslie et al. 2002).

Symbolic interactionism places primary value on subjective meaning and process rather than on structure, using methodology that captures the world of individuals. The experience of employees of diversity management and leaders in organisations explore interaction, subjective meanings, group membership and organisational roles in organisations.

Hall (2005) points out that inequality has historically been an issue for the social sciences and has recently been made more complex by the multiple dimensions of class, gender, race and ethnicity. Symbolic interaction offers insight and direction into how inequality persists through insight into the conditions, processes and consequences of inequality.

A comprehensive understanding of diversity, diversity management and leadership would appear to require a multi-disciplinary approach. The social interactionist approach derives its emphasis primarily from symbolic interactionism. The manner in which symbolic

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interaction integrates individual, societal and human relations links its perspective to social psychology. This theoretical study is based on, and incorporates ways of looking at, diversity management in its broadest sense, as well as contemporary interactive leadership theories from the symbolic interactionist paradigm. The diversity leadership model of competencies in the conclusion of the article is essentially developed from the leadership theory of Mintzberg (2004) and is explained by means of the symbolic interactionist theory.

Symbolic Interactionist Theory

Symbolic interactionism is an individual-centred orientation that focuses on individuals in interaction and within a group, and on the composition and development of the self and personality. Its theory is employed in this study because of the focus on the employee experience of diversity resulting from interactions in the workplace.

This perspective has its roots in the pragmatist philosophies of Mead, Dewey, Thomas and Park of the so-called Chicago School (Farganis 2008). The method advocated by symbolic interactionism is to look at the process through which individuals define the world from the inside and at the same time identify their world of objects.

This predominantly small-scale theory focuses on interactions and individuals' personalities. It is a subject-orientated approach that emphasises the subjective intentions and orientations of individuals in relation to their wishes, motivations, wants and situations, in addition to their interpretation and understanding of symbols. A fundamental premise of symbolic interactionism is the reflexive nature of human action. It assumes that human nature is not motivated solely by external and internal factors, but rather through meaningful, reflexive interactions between individuals.

Reflexivity entails the capacity to use and respond to significant gestures such as language, symbols and thoughts. Behaviour is seen as reflexive because individuals understand and react to what other people think and say about their behaviour. "Our actions are always engaged with the actions of others; whose response to what we do sends us signals as to their approval or disapproval" (Farganis 2008: 133).

As such, the theoretical study examines the experience of diversity management and leadership style in South African companies within the context of broader external and internal factors, such as societal trends and meaningful, reflexive interactive experiences between employees and leaders, presented in the theoretical analysis of leadership theory.

The perceptions, behaviour and experiences of humans cannot easily be determined or quantified. Rand (1986: 356) believed that "People are not just products of society; they are conscious, choosing individuals, constructing their own social reality, living in the inter-subjective world of everyday life… Human action is therefore action with purpose and involves emotion, cognition and values in the process of choice and interaction." People are not passive recipients of the external world who simply respond to "stimuli"; they rather interpret social reality in terms of meaning. The experience of diversity management is interpreted as social reality in terms of the meaning it holds for people in the workplace.

Symbolic interactionism as an individual-centred orientation focuses on individuals in interaction and within a group, as well as on the composition and development of the self and personality. Parker et al. (1997: 2) explained this interpretative process, how it distinguishes behaviour from action and "is made possible by a universe of symbols which links the individual to sets of ongoing socially constructed meanings". The concept of generational transition as an element of diversity management links it to socially constructed meanings particularly within Mead's (1929) central philosophy of history as evolution.

Individuals interact in terms of shared meanings, the meanings they attribute to each other's actions and the situations in which such interactions take place. This is the basis of understanding diversity and leadership experience in the world of work. Social interaction as a process is a dynamic negotiation of inter-subjective realities in which meaning becomes patterned, the self becomes defined and choices of action become explicated. Symbolic interactionism as a social-psychological perspective focuses on individuals with a self and on the interaction between people's internal thoughts and emotions and their social behaviour (Plummer 2000). The theory holds that the form

that interaction takes emerges from the specific situation concerned.

Symbolic interaction differs from the functionalist's approach, which places emphasis on "norms" and implies that most interaction is fixed in advance. Symbolic interactionism does not view the inherent relationship between society and the individual as deterministic. Symbolic interaction does not ignore the influence of "social" norms and rules, but emphasises the individual's decisions and actions, which are explained within a set of predetermined rules and external forces (Farganis 2008).

The central underlying premise of symbolic interactionism is, therefore, that the individual and society are not separable. Complete interpretation of the individual is necessary to interpret society, and vice versa. The symbolic interactionists posit that society can only be understood through understanding the individuals who comprise that society, whereas individuals can only be understood in terms of the society to which they belong.

The role of "social order" is somewhat relegated in this perspective, since it is not considered more significant than the individual who creates the influences that are felt within the context of the individual's social environment. In other words, the individual leader creates the influences that are experienced. "Since much of the environment's influence is experienced in the form of social meanings; and meanings are learned by individuals in social interaction, behaviour is constructed and circular, not predetermined and released" (Wallace and Wolf 1980).

Symbolic interactionism does not interpret the individual in isolation from society and it gives priority to either one. Individuals are formed in and through their society, while playing a role in creating the particular character and nature of that society. Essentially, the theory holds that before an awareness of the self and before the mind, there is a world that is there and, from this world of immediacy, all intellectual and conscious activities ultimately arise (Aboulafia 1991).

Plummer's (2000: 223-225) description of the main characteristics of the symbolic interaction perspective is presented as follows:

Symbols: The social world is composed of material and objective features, distinguishing humans in their existence and creative use of communication through symbols. The history, culture and forms of communications of humans can be traced through symbols, and it is through symbols that meaning is associated with interpretation, action and interaction. The symbolic interactionist studies and analyses the processes involved in all aspects of the use of symbols and communication.

Change, Adjustment, Becoming: The symbolic interactionist perspective considers people as active agents, different from the rational, self-centred, autonomous individual of the 19th century's liberalism. People are actors or agents and the social world is an active one – with constant adjustment and organisation as essential features of social interaction.

Interaction: This perspective is not just concerned with the individual or with society, but with the joint acts through which lives are organised and societies assembled.

Empirical: The most important feature of symbolic interactionism is its attention to what actually occurs when humans interact.

These elements are inherent to Mead's theory of the emergence of mind and of the social process of significant communication, regarded as the foundation of the symbolic interactionist school of sociology and psychology.

Perceptions, Experience and Symbolic Interaction

Forgus (1996: 254) supported the symbolic interactionist theory by defining perception as follows: "Perception results from interaction between an individual and his environment." Robbins (1983) further described perception as a process whereby individuals interpret their sensory impressions to give meaning to their environment.

Perception, in Mead's theory, is the relation between organism and object. Perception is not something that occurs in the organism; it is an objective relation between the organism and its environment, and the perceptual object is not the reality out there, independent of the organism, but is one of the interactive perceptual processes.

Perception arises within the individual's attempt to solve problems that have emerged from experience, problems that arise, and in an important sense, are determined by the individual him-/herself. The perception of the

individual's environment is predetermined by the individual's sensory capacities. Mead (1934: 1) explained "in the study of experience and behaviour of the individual organism or self, in its dependence upon the social group to which it belongs, we find a definition of the field of social-psychology". Mead (1938) described "the act" as developing in four stages: impulse, perception, manipulation and assumption.

The individual must, in the same way that he/she takes the attitudes of others toward him-/herself and towards one another, take the attitudes of others towards the various phases or aspects of the common social activity in which the individual, as a member of an organised society or social group, is engaged in. This should be done by means of the generalisation of these individual attitudes of that group (or society) as a whole, acting towards different social projects that constitute his/her life and of which these projects are specific manifestations (Farganis 2008: 134).

Leadership, Diversity Management and Symbolic Interaction

"Leadership is a supremely human activity where an emotional connection is created, trust is fostered and loyalty is strong. Leaders understand and resonate with the emotional needs and wants of people who follow them" (Kotter 1999: 11). As such, leadership interpreted from the premise of symbolic interaction is a subject-orientated approach, placing the emphasis on the subjective intension of individual wishes, motivations, situations and interpretation of symbols. Leadership is the complex interactive relationship between leaders, the needs of followers, the organisational processes and the external environment.

The experience of management style and leadership traits is central to symbolic interaction. The individual's perceptual appraisal of the situation of diversity management and its relation to leadership style in the workplace are analysed in the study. Managing of diversity cannot be separated from the management of people, as both require the same skills of the leader. Mead viewed the self as an acting organism, not as a passive receptacle that simply receives stimuli. The self is the actor rather than the acted-upon. To Mead, "the self is more than an internalisation of components of social structure and culture, it is a social process of self-interaction, in which the human actor indicates to himself, matters that confront him in the situations in which he acts" (Blumer 1975: 68).

"Managing diversity concerns understanding the self and the extent to which one-dimensional and value-laden thinking can both perpetuate dysfunctional social interaction and affect performance and motivation in organisations" (Human 1996: 42). The self as the actor, who engages in interaction with him-/herself, underlies the concept of understanding the self through self-interaction.

The Meadian concept of self-interaction and the consequent communication with others, explains daily experiences. Mead's description of people's ability, through the mechanism of self-interaction, to form and guide their own conduct, and his belief that individuals act on their own environment and create objects, is inherent to managing diversity and inclusion as a leadership competency.

Mead distinguished between things and stimuli that existed prior to, and independent of, the individual, and things that exist only through the conversion of things to objects through the acts of individuals (Wallace and Wolf 2006). From this theoretical view it is suggested that how leaders interact with the self or feel about themselves and how they feel about others, influence the interaction and the manner in which communication is undertaken and how leadership style thus affects the experience of diversity management.

Mead described the "I" and the "me" as responding to a social situation that is within the experience of the individual. Individuals take the attitude of others towards them, in response to their own attitude towards them. We are aware of ourselves and of what the situation is, but exactly how we will act never gets into experience until after the action has taken place (Mead 1938).

Social Relations Model

Mead's analysis of social relations presents two models: Intra-group consensus/Extra-group conflict and Intra-group conflict/Extra-group consensus.

This analysis has relevance in the interpretation of diversity management within the context of industrial sociology. In the first

model, members of a given group are united in their opposition to another group, which is characterised as the "common enemy" of all the members of the united "in-group." Mead (1938) suggested that the concept of a "common enemy" is central to much of human social organisation and that it is frequently the main reference point of intra-group consensus. As such, many human organisations derive their sense of solidarity from the existence (or putative existence) of the "enemy". The "generalised other" of such an organisation is formed in opposition to the generalisation of the enemy. The individual is "with" the members of the group and "against" members of the other group (Cronck 2005).

The second model describes the process in which individuals react against their own group. They appeal to a "higher sort of community" they regard as superior to their own by appealing to the past. Social criticism presupposes a social-symbolic process and social self, capable of symbolic reflexive activity.

Moreover, Mead (1938) posited the temporal nature of interaction between consensus and conflict. He suggested that human conflict often leads to reaction, which creates new forms of consensus. Conflict is therefore positive. When it occurs, it could lead to the reconstruction of particular social situations. He argued that such reconstructions of society are affected by the minds of individuals in conflict and constitute enlargements of the social whole.

Human society, Mead suggested further, contains a multiplicity of generalised others. Many managers tend to generalise and classify other people and objects into groups based on their direct and indirect experience. Human (1996) suggested that such generalisations are often held even in the presence of internal contradictions and the presence of other social variables. The complexity of individual identity and individual interaction has implications for the manner in which the manager will manage diversity at work.

Leaders who develop employees are more likely to increase motivation, commitment and self-confidence than are leaders not concerned with the development of people. Performance does not only depend on ability, but on the "conversation" (self-interaction) individuals have with themselves about their ability (self-confidence) and the conversations managers/leaders have with themselves about others.

As such, Mead argued that the individual's response to the social world is active. Here the "I" (refer to the way Mead explain his own theory) is the response to the "me" of the social self. The "I" appears as a symbolised object in our consciousness of our past actions. This suggests that leadership competency in managing diversity could be developed through self-interaction.

Stereotypes are generalisations about groups of people that might be unduly fixed and inflexible and fail to recognise that individuals have multiple identities that do not correspond to stereotypes and are used as a basis for judgement, rather than situationally relevant criteria (Human 1996). The organisation creates symbolic meaning. The meaning of a symbol is derived from Mead's definition of a gesture, which is the first element of an act, as well as a sign for the whole act. Internalised gestures are significant symbols because they have the same meaning for all individual members of a given society or social group. The meaning respectively arouses in the individuals responding to them (Mead 1934).

Meaning is a social product, created and not inherent in things. Symbolic interactionism holds the principle of meaning as central in human behaviour (Nelson 1998). The meanings of things are handled in and modified through an interpretative process used by the person in dealing with the things he/she encounters. Blumer explained that a person communicates and establishes meanings through a process of "talking to the self".

For new challenges to be mastered and tasks better performed, competence and self-confidence need to be developed. Organisations that provide the opportunity for their staff to develop and optimise their talents and skills, also create a more rewarding and challenging environment in which to work (Human 1996: 13).

Further, to viewing performance and development as a function of an individual's motivation, ability and self-confidence, is the role of the "significant other", that is, the role of others such as the manager and colleagues involved in the individual's development, motivation, confidence and ultimate performance.

Human (1996: 14) referred to the role of expectancy communication: verbal and non-verbal expressions of what one person expects of another. "Expectancies have a powerful

impact on performance, because of their impact on both behaviour and cognition." A manager who expresses a negative expectation directly to someone who lacks self-confidence could influence that person's behaviour in the form of under-performance. Human (1996) generally concluded that in many inter-cultural situations, differential status is assigned according to stereotypical ideas about the attitudes and behaviour of particular groups, such as is characteristic of Mead's intra-group consensus model. Members of some groups tend to project themselves as superior; members of others may feel inferior or inadequate in inter-cultural encounters, such as described by Mead's second model, whereby individuals appeal to the community they regard as superior to their own. Athens (2005: 185) specifically used Blumer's (1975) remark with regard to prejudice: "No group has a monopoly on racism, sexism or ethnicity or religious prejudice. The only difference between a superior or subordinate group is that the former is usually in a better position than the latter to put its group prejudice into practice."

Social Groups and Diversity Management

Mead (1934: 157) distinguished two social groups in civilised communities: concrete social classes or subgroups, and abstract social classes or subgroups. In the first, individual members are directly related to one another. In the second, individuals relate to one another "indirectly, and function only more or less as social units, but afford unlimited possibilities for the widening, ramifying and enriching of social relations among all the individual members of the given society, as an organised and unified whole".

This description of the two types of social groups in civilised communities explains the concept of diversity and inclusion as defined by Roberson (2004). Inclusion refers to "seeking out and valuing the knowledge and experience of diverse employees" who are more or less indirectly related in functional social units (the workplace), which affords unlimited possibilities for widening and ramifying social interactions among the individuals of a society (Roberson 2004: 28).

Cronck (2005: 15) explained Mead's approach further: The individual is capable of membership of multiple groups, simultaneously and serially, and may relate to different generalised others at different times, or may extend the concept of the generalised other by identifying himself with a larger community than the one in which he had belonged to. In this regard, Cronck (2005) explained that individuals might come to view themselves as members of a nation rather than a specific ethnic group, or generational group rather than as members of a particular nation.

Mead (1934) suggested that in the most highly developed, organised and complicated human social communities, which evolved from civilised humans, various functional classes or subgroups of individuals to which any given individual belongs are of two kinds. These are concrete classes or subgroups in terms of which individual members are directly related to one another; others are abstract social classes or subgroups in terms of which individual members are related to one another only more or less indirectly. The symbolic interaction perspective, referring to the members of the united "in-group" and the main reference point of intra-group consensus, supports the terms "dominant" and "non-dominant", or "represented" and "under represented" groups used in the study. These terms refer to "designated groups" as defined by the Employment Equity Act EEA: No 66 of 1998 (hereafter referred to EEA). The Meadian concept of the concrete social group and the abstract social group, as discussed earlier, underlies the use of the terms "dominant" and "non-dominant" groups.

The perspective of Mead and symbolic interaction is useful to the understanding of diversity management, because it indicates how individuals attach meaning and shape their behaviour in groups, connecting with the self and to different group structures. Since this study bases its approach on symbolic interaction, various related diversity management theories are presented broadly.

A symbolic interaction approach to diversity management refers to the concept of the "self-interaction" and the consequent experiences through interaction. Self-conception influences how individuals communicate with others and the conscious and unconscious choices individuals make of those with whom they form relations, through interaction (Gudykunst 1988).

Symbolic interaction views individuals as part of creating and developing the society in

which the individual functions, playing a dynamic role in the direction of destiny. "We are aware of ourselves, and of what the situation is, but exactly how we will act never gets into experience until after the action takes place" (Mead 1934: 177).

Social Identity and Social Categorisation Theories

In their review of diversity in organisations, Williams and O'Reilly (1998) found that researchers usually approach the study of diversity from either the "social identity" or "social categorisation" process, that is, the "similarity-attraction" paradigm; "informational and decision-making" theories; and the degree of "distinctiveness". As such, the similarity attraction and distinctiveness paradigm could be directly related to Mead's description of the concrete social class or subgroups, whereby members are directly related to one another, versus the abstract social class or subgroup, whereby individuals related only more or less indirectly in a social unit. Gudykunst (1988) held that the stronger the social identity of the individual, the more important group membership becomes to how the individual defines the self.

Symbolic interaction theory suggests that individuals are capable of membership of multiple groups simultaneously and serially. Individuals may relate to different generalised others at different times, as meaning is attached to interaction. Social identity and social categorisation refer to the process whereby people derive at least part of their identity from the social categories to which they belong, using those categories to categorise others as similar or different from themselves (Brewer 1995). He furthermore suggested that categorising people based on perceived differences could lead to conflict between in-group and out-group members. Tsui et al. (1995) suggested that similarity in demographics leads to an inference or assumption about similarity in values, beliefs and attitudes; a presumed knowledge of the other individual's values, beliefs and attitudes lead to a sense of predictability, comfort and confidence regarding the other individual's likely behaviour in the future. From a symbolic interactive perspective, Hogg and Terry (2000) believed that people act according to their salient identities and favour a context, which strengthens group identities.

Self-categorisation Theory

This theory states that people tend to classify themselves and others into various social categories based on observable differences. The similarity attraction paradigm describes humans to be attracted to those who hold similar attitudes and opinions and are therefore in the same social category.

Härtel (2004) referred to the in-group, out-group distinction which reasoned that negative stereotypes and prejudices cause members to make biased attributions about other members. Non-prejudiced people will consciously override their negative stereotypes.

This theory can be interpreted from Mead's description of "concrete social classes" and "abstract social classes", where individuals directly relate to one another. In essence, social behaviourisms result from the interaction of the individuals in a social matrix, as discussed earlier.

Dominant and Non-dominant Groups and Co-cultural Muted Group Theory

Orbe (1998) took a symbolic interactionist view in suggesting that many co-cultural groups, (women, people of colour, homosexuals and bisexuals) living simultaneously in society, have to negotiate through communication and interaction for their place in relation to one another. The power, however, according to Orbe, rests with the dominant group, the European white male heterosexual, who "set" the parameters of interaction of those in our major societal institutions. As a result, the experiences of those in the non-dominant groups are muted by the dominant culture. This is referred to as the "muted group theory" (Kramarae 1981).

This theory suggested that public interaction and systems of language, symbols and communication within social institutions become structured around the often hidden but powerful systems that have been set in place by those in positions of power. Individuals and groups in non-dominant positions become less visible; their voices thus become "muted".

Orbe (1998) explained that co-cultural theory seeks to provide a framework to gain insight into how those with little or no societal power communicate with those aligned with power, from dominant society structures. Muted group

theory is essential to this examination as it acknowledges and describes asymmetrical power relations within social hierarchies. An important contribution of co-cultural theory is its approach to communication from the perspective of those without power.

Symbolic interactionism supports this notion in its theory that individuals become objects to themselves through the attitude and behaviour of others towards them, within a social context. In the process of communicating with the inner self, individuals adopt the role of others and view themselves from their viewpoint, rather than assimilating "norms" from a process perspective. Individuals have several "selves", due to interaction with various people and groups.

The Standpoint Theory of Smith (1987)

The standpoint theory and feminist work of Harding (1987-1991) found in Allison and Hibbler (2004) suggested that to understand co-cultural relations, the life experience of those in subordinate positions should be explored. Co-cultural theory provides a framework to access, from the perspective of historically marginalised individuals, their view of interaction between dominant and non-dominant relations within existing social structures.

The standpoint theory, in the same way as the muted group theory, recognises the great diversity of experience that links the human experiences of those in non-dominant positions. "While one can explore the commonalities of experience, this approach does not presume that individuals in marginalised positions all construe their world in the same way" (Allison and Hibbler 2004: 263).

Allison and Hibbler (2004) proposed the co-cultural theory, which builds on the conceptual underpinnings of the muted group theory and standpoint theory, as it suggests that dominant and non-dominant group relations are played out in the interactive and communicative experience of daily life. This view is inherently supported by symbolic interaction.

Informational and Decision-making Theory

Tziner and Eden (1985), decision-making theory as discussed by Leslie et al. (2002), suggested that the more distinctive individuals are, the more self-aware they will become. The self-awareness of individuals in turn leads them to compare their behaviour to the norms of the group.

Leslie et al. (2002) pointed out that one could assume that individuals in the global organisation context would have at least three reference groups (a group to which people refer to when making evaluations about themselves and their behaviour). These groups belong to a native culture; to the culture with which they come into contact, as suggested by Ferdman (1995); and to the organisational culture. Generally, most research (Ferdman 1995; Leslie et al. 2002; Cox 1993) supports the belief that workplace homogeneity makes relationships and communication easier.

Cox (1993) presented the conceptual framework whereby organisations are explained as "monolithic", meaning there are relatively few minority employees and diversity initiatives are subject to resistance; or "multicultural" organisations where minorities are represented at all levels of the organisation and diversity is incorporated, as a basic value in the corporate culture.

Group identity is seen as an affiliation with others with whom one has a common interest. These identities are fundamental to the manner in which cultural identity influences behaviour in the workplace. Cox (1993) defined "phenotype identity", based on visually observable differences. Cox, moreover, suggested that reactions such as stereotyping and prejudice are typically activated based on phenotype identity. Stereotyping is defined as a perceptual and cognitive process, where specific behavioural traits are ascribed to individuals based on their apparent membership of a particular group. Phenotype identity groups are based on physical, visually observable differences.

Accepted in symbolic interaction is a human's prior meaning, which is always "remembered". A self-concept may be old, but it influences the individual's behaviour. The human mind automatically recalls any stored data about members of a group upon visual identification. Expectations and assumptions are therefore often attached to phenotype identifications and influence interaction with the other in a particular manner. This view is supported from the symbolic interaction view of "self-interaction" in which human actors indicate to themselves that which confronts them in the situation in which they act (Blumer 1975).

Multi-dimensional Approach to Diversity

Aligned with the previous discussions of diversity as a broad concept, Maier (2002) discovered 38 diversity dimensions. This multi-dimensionality, which he termed a "kaleidoscope", argued that diversity as a concept has many dimensions – similarities as well as differences. According to Maier, the individual ceases to be a member of a certain nation, ethnicity, race or gender group and becomes a multi-dimensional unique kaleidoscope. The framework Maier (2002) posed focuses on personal behaviour and the interactions of workgroup members.

Multiple dimensions, claimed Rijamampianina and Carmichael (2005), interact with and influence one another and emerge, or are displayed differently in different contexts, environments and circumstances, making analysis and (diversity) management complex. This illustrates the multi-dimensionality of diversity in reference to the individual as a "kaleidoscope".

The kaleidoscope approach to diversity management is thus fundamentally imbedded in the theory of symbolic interaction. It suggests that the way in which we perceive others, and how we interpret their behaviour, determines how we will pattern our behaviour towards them. In other words, what we think we see in others will determine how we treat them and respond to them. The appropriateness of our behaviour will depend on the accuracy of what we think we see in others (Human 1996).

In deciding how to relate to others, the individual makes both conscious and unconscious judgements about their qualities, such as their honesty, integrity, sincerity, loyalty and creativity. Human (1996) believed information for objective judgments is normally practically inaccessible. The information does not exist up-front. This results in judgments being made on symbolic representations of the qualities of goodness or badness and inevitably leads to a reliance on social stereotypes.

A judgment on whether someone is honest and trustworthy is inferred from symbolic representations in meaning through symbols. Each individual develops social stereotypes that simplify the process of social perception. Simplifying interpersonal interaction becomes a practical necessity, which makes the individual adopt social perceptions that eventually become social stereotypes. This process is naturally subjective and interpersonal effectiveness is adversely affected, according to Human (1996).

Human (1996) furthermore suggested that the major problem with generalised perspectives is that it creates a sense of determinacy and immutability, while the extremely detailed perspective, on the other hand, presents individuals as so complex that general rules tend to be misleading. Symbolic interaction, in its view of seeing individuals existing in a social situation, which responds to the situation although that particular situation has particular character, does not completely determine the response of the individual. Kark and Van Dijk (2007) suggested that different situations bring different aspects of the self to the fore and this self-concept could change through various external factors.

The kaleidoscope analogy is used, whereby an individual is viewed as a multi-dimensional "kaleidoscope of patterns and sub-patterns". Each segment represents different aspects of the individual's identity and as the kaleidoscope is turned, different presentations are formed. Human (2005) employed this term to explain how social identities change within themselves, impact on each other within specific contexts, and how individuals with a variety of social identities interact with each other. The strength of particular identities varies from person to person.

Social identity is a highly complex concept comprising a variety of changing and dynamic identities and personality factors (Human 2005). Interaction between two individuals is even more complex, especially with respect to knowing how to respond to the other in partial situations and the consequences of the responses chosen. Human maintained that what is needed in a diversity approach is the ability to differentiate between the various individual identities and to integrate these based on information relevant to a particular context.

Cox (1993) found that in-group/out-group bias might occur based on group identity, for instance groups such as graduates and non-graduates. Rijamampianina and Carmichael (2005) were of the view that organisations need to create a sense of ownership through sharing mental models. The purpose of this process is to enable the diverse group to reach gradual co-creation of a shared set of meanings and a

common thinking process. This premise rests on the symbolic interaction theory described above.

When people interact, they consciously or unconsciously communicate both verbally and non-verbally (for example through body language). When people communicate they convey messages through their mental models, which are shaped by their cultures, educational background, gender, age and the other dimensions through which diversity is viewed (Rijamampianina and Carmichael 2005: 113).

Socio-cultural Evolution

The present, upon which the individual acts, is dynamic and implies the past and the future. The socio-cultural evolution theory holds that societies change and develop over time from simpler to more complex forms (Popenoe 1987). Mead's (1938) approach to evolution is stated in social terms. He regarded the concept of sociality as fundamentally evolutionary. For Mead, the idea of process and structure is not mutually exclusive, but dialectically related in historical development. Historical thought, Mead said, becomes one way of getting into the structure, the movement of the current process. He described reality as a process in which events adjust to a new situation and adapt to various consentient sets (Cronck 2005). He also summarised Mead's description of human existence as temporary, historical and evolutionary, which involves a constant reconstruction of reality with reference to changing conditions and newly emergent situations. This process of evolutionary reconstruction, according to Mead, is evident in institutional change. Blumer (1962) believed the nature of the social world is interpretative and commented that the world is infinitely complex and heterogeneous.

History, according to Mead, is the collective time of the social act. Historical thought arises in response to emergent events, such as new situations, which are experienced in communities (Cronck 2005).

CONCLUSION

This article describes the interactionist viewpoint as an underpinning theory in the study of leadership style as a component of diversity management experience. According to the symbolic interactionist theory, when we act we "fit" what we do with what other people in the situation are doing or thinking. To do so requires an interpretation of symbolic meanings of other people's acts.

The employee experience of diversity management is interpreted through symbolic meaning. Through this theory, which underlies this article, the individual leader's behaviour, expressed as "style", is regarded as having been formed in and through society. "The individual is constantly reacting to an organization community in expressing himself and the attitudes involved are gained from the group, but the individual has the opportunity of giving them an expression" (Mead 1934: 197).

The leader plays a pivotal role in establishing the character and nature of the organisation experienced by employees. Leaders of an organisation are tasked with differentiating their organisations, through greater efficiencies in performance, in a changing environment in which nationality, colour, religion, ethnicity, gender, disability, sexual orientation and generational differences are key elements of the diversity workforce.

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