Reviving agency: Taking time and making space for rethinking diversity and inclusion


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Abstract

The path of social inclusion has proven difficult for minority groups in the European context. In this article, we focus on the inclusion of refugees, particularly in the labor market, and show how the difficulties they faced were related to dominant discourses on migration. Uncovering the hegemonic assumptions within these discourses is crucial in order to enable a rethinking of diversity issues and inclusion. We addressed this through an intervention research, which was part of an empowerment project for refugees. The research included and connected refugees engaged in searching for work to Dutch professionals engaged with diversity issues. Through social intervention, this research aimed to create empowerment through critical reflection on the ways that the power of dominant discourses works in the practice of everyday life. By contrasting the discursive positioning of participants with different backgrounds, the research created alternative spaces for reflection. This, in turn, led to the production of alternative narratives and allowed participants to claim agency in the face of the dominant discourses.
Introduction

Diversity is one of the most pressing and challenging issues of our time. Vertovec (2007) defines our current state as the condition of ‘super-diversity:’ a state which is less ordered and less tangible than its late-twentieth century counterpart. In this time of omnipresent cultural diversity we are witness to paradoxical processes of inclusion and exclusion. On the one hand, there is an increasing demand for culturally sensitive measures and cultural recognition. On the other hand, we observe explicit and subtle processes of exclusion in the workplace. It is within this context that the contemporary discussion of the social inclusion of culturally diverse groups takes place. If we look at the Dutch context, many initiatives have been undertaken, both at the organizational level and in the form of government actions, to support and enhance the participation of (ethnic) minorities in the labor market. However, most Dutch organizations remain predominantly exclusive toward ethnic minorities, especially at the top (Essed 2002). Studies show that the negative images of migrants in general and of refugees in particular is the main reason for their exclusion (Desain & Hello, 2006; Nieves & Andriessen, 2010). Even where the number of minority groups in the organization increases, the professional development and career prospects of these employees often remain limited. Thus, the management of diversity appears to be ‘a Herculean task, requiring much more than managerial enthusiasm, optimism and good intentions’ (Prasad & Mills, 1997, p. 5).

In this paper, we will elaborate on an interactive research project in which we aimed to further the discussion on social inclusion in and beyond organizations. In our understanding, the core of the problem when it comes to dealing with diversity issues is the notion of power. This paper focuses on the power of the dominant discourses shaping interactions and practices of individuals within organizations and societal contexts. Through a particular form of participative research, we involved a number of participants (refugees searching for a job and Dutch professionals interested in diversity) in a process of theoretically informed critical reflection aimed at challenging their own discursive positionings. The project, which involved multiple encounters over a period of two and a half months, was called the masterclass Diversity in Organisations. Our research method, partly inspired by participative action research (Kindon, Pain, & Kesby, 2007), was designed to employ the research process itself as a site for change, through which the agency of the participants would be fostered. Through the intersection of theoretical input and personal and organizational experiences, the participants provided space to each other to reflect upon their positioning by relating it to the dominant Dutch discourses. By ‘reflection’ we meant critical contemplation with an ‘explicit focus on uncovering, and challenging hegemonic assumptions’ (Brookfield, 2009, p. 293). The assumption of this project was that reflection would enable individuals to distance themselves from their taken-for-granted discursive positioning and by doing so, broaden their perspective for action. This would then contribute to sustainable possibilities for claiming agency within the problematic discursive structures of dominance.

Diversity and discursive power

Diversity in organizations is not only about fair representation of diverse social identity groups but also about respecting and valuing differences. Focusing on the ‘body count’ fails to take into account the experience of minority group members in the workplace (Ahmed, Hunter, Kilic, Swan,
& Turner, 2006; Puwar, 2004), while focusing on experience may reveal persisting inequalities within the organization (e.g., Ibarra, 1995). Prasad, Pringle, and Konrad (2006, p. 3) identify that discussions about diversity in organizations reflect broader societal debates on cultural assimilation versus cultural pluralism. Holvino and Kamp (2009, p. 398) refer to this discussion as the ‘sameness-difference’ dilemma: in which diversity is either assimilated or essentialized. In line with this, Thomas and Ely (1996) present two major paradigms in dealing with diversity in organizations. The first focuses on tackling the ways in which discrimination emerges as a source of exclusion in organizations. Yet, the solution in this paradigm is to assimilate the difference into sameness by introducing ‘colorblind policies.’ The second paradigm is the one that celebrates diversity as a way to seek access to a more diverse clientele. Within this paradigm, difference is included, yet, somewhat marginalized within organizations. It is employed solely for promotion to a diverse group of clientele. An example of this is ethnic marketing, which uses people of color to promote products.

Thomas and Ely (1996) introduce the third paradigm in which diversity is valued as a challenge for the organization as a whole and not essentialized into the margins. Instead of neutralizing diversity this paradigm gives it space to ‘make a difference’ (Janssens & Steyaert, 2001). This means questioning normalized bias and practices that institutionalize the advantages of employees from ethnic majorities (generally, white and male). When the mind-set within organizations remains unchanged, nontraditional employees (i.e., women, migrants/refugees, disabled) remain ‘space invaders’ in the organizational realm (Puwar, 2004). Puwar (2004) admits that the mere presence of ‘space invaders’ is of significance because it makes the ‘maleness and whiteness of being’ of the traditional organization evident and helps illuminate its dynamics. However, she argues that this presence by itself does not make an organization truly diverse, because it does not challenge its institutional relations. Moreover, prescribing the assimilation of new employees by smoothing their differences (elements that are perceived as out of tune with the expectations of the organization, thus with the organizational culture) means failing to recognize the deeper challenge that diversity poses to modern organizations. In order to actually make space for difference within the organizational dynamics, we need to unmask and question the explicit and implicit norms underlying organizational practices.

A focus on dominant discourses and the connected practices and norms structuring social relations, standards, and expectations is crucial for making actual space for newcomers in the late modern organization. This means including the power of normalization into the core of organizational analysis. Investigating the ways that the intersection of salient discourses defines the relational subject positions enables us to identify the tacit sources of exclusion. In everyday practices, relationships of similarity and difference are made through somewhat unreflective processes of ‘discursive positioning’ which produce ‘categorical alternatives’ (Ybema et al., 2009, p. 307). The challenge of diversity could thus only be taken seriously when these taken-for-granted discursive positions are unraveled through reflexivity thus creating space for agency. In line with Zanoni and Janssens (2007, p. 1376), we define agency as individuals’ ‘capacity to be reflexive about their situation – their “discursive consciousness” – and to act upon it to “make a difference.”’ Although the power of discursive practices affects everyone, ‘because there are competing discourses, socialization into any one discourse is never complete, and resistance to specific discursive regimes
is thus possible’ (Foucault in Clarke, Brown, & Hailey, 2009, p. 325). In other words, agency means emancipation from one’s discursive position by focusing on previously unreflected relations.

This approach provides an alternative to the instrumental approaches of diversity by considering the issue of diversity in terms of politics (concerning awareness of relations of power) rather than as a matter of management (Cavanaugh, 1997; Janssens & Steyaert, 2001; Nealon, 1999). Rethinking diversity means changing position toward discourses supporting mechanisms that keep some people ‘far from the center’ and other people ‘at the center’ of power (Janssens & Steyaert, 2001). Inspired by critical diversity literature (Dick & Cassell, 2002; Essed & Nimako, 2006; Ostendorp & Steyaert, 2009; Zanoni et al., 2010), in this study we show how creating spaces for reflexivity enables individuals to make alternative choices.

Methodology

The research was informed by a social constructionist approach. We wanted to understand the effects of the intersection of salient discourses on the positioning of individuals in relation to diversity issues. Therefore, we provided the participants with tools to actively reflect on their own discursive positioning. For this, we sought inspiration in the methodology of participative action research, which we understood as: ‘a way of learning how to explain a particular social world by working with the people who live in it to construct, test and improve theories about it, so they can better control it’ (Elden & Levin, 1991, p. 131). Within participative action research subjects play an active role through engagement at the boundaries of theory and practice. The research then becomes a process of ‘conscientization:’ ‘an enquiry process aimed at shaping knowledge relevant to action, built on a critical understanding of historical and political contexts within which participants act’ (Freire in Greenwood & Levin, 1998, p. 253). Our research became a site in which the power of discourses became visible through the interactions among participants. Theoretical insights provided within the research gave the participants a frame to produce re-descriptions of experiences by linking these experiences with theory.

What we tried to achieve through this form of participative research was to create spaces for reflection in order to find alternative ways of positioning. Johnson and Duberley refer to this as the deconstructive form of reflexivity, ‘where the focus is on offering an alternative view of the same reality’ (Ybema et al., 2009, p. 315). We used specific forms of discourse analysis, by contrasting different discursive positionings to provide mirrors for reflexivity. The main assumption here is that majority and minority groups are positioned differently in relation to the dominant discourses they are engaged with.

As researchers, we identified the dominant discourses that matter most when referring to diversity issues, both on the organizational and societal levels. By presenting these discourses within specific contexts, we enabled participants (some more than others) to go beyond what they considered common sense. By doing so, spaces for agency were created. Diversity in organizations has become a ‘global issue,’ having its various translations in diversity of local contexts and organizational practices (Ostendorp & Steyaert, 2009). These contextual and organizational translations have influenced the conceptualization of diversity issues. Holvino and Kamp, for example, show that the context of the US serves as a different translation of the concept than that of the European Welfare states which focus on notions of equality as sameness (2009, p. 397). To help participants
understand the historical and political embeddedness of particular discussions on diversity, we chose to study some literature together. Participants explored the dominant societal discourses on migration in the Dutch context and their impact on the dominant discourse on diversity in organizations. Also, we provided the group with some literature on the conditions needed to create space for reflection. We were aware of the limitations of this choice, which brought a specific deductive angle to our methodology. Another limitation was that any theoretical and contextual selection of a framework was based on our own positioning as researchers within society and the academic field. Yet, this choice proved to be appealing for an approach centered on contrasting discursive positionings. Most importantly, identifying historically constructed discourses was crucial to our situational approach.

**Situational approach**

In keeping with the appeal for a ‘politics of diversity,’ the project was set up to be, first of all, a site for interaction and reflection. A site in which participants could learn to recognize and analyze situations from their daily lives producing exclusion/inclusion of the other, and to find ways to break the patterns of thought and action which produce exclusion. In this way we hoped to ‘recover “critical-creative thinking” […] with an emancipating vocation […]’ to enable ‘new solutions from a multidimensional approach that will generate new ideas’ (Sáenz de Ugarte & Martin-Aranaga, 2011, p. 453). We assume that individuals are not mere reproducers of discourses ‘but agents who engage with it and who, through such engagement, might create opportunities for their micro-emancipation’ (Zanoni & Janssens, 2007, p. 1374). This boils down to a constant search for balance between focusing on the individual and on group and societal dynamics as well as on the specific aspects of concrete situations and the social contexts that are relevant to understand them. Informed by this situational approach, our primary focus was on the interactions between people in which power relationships are produced and reflected upon. We tried to increase the ability of participants to recognize the historically constructed, political nature of specific accounts of their experiences in addition to the ways in which positions and roles were defined in this constructed reality. Participants were challenged to produce alternative narratives.

**Research setting and participants**

The project covered a period of two and a half months (September–November 2008) and included several sessions with the members of the group. The sessions included one introductory plenary session, a series of workshops in which groups of five/six participants worked together, five plenary sessions concentrated in one intensive weekend, and a concluding meeting in which the outcomes of the project and the work done by participants were presented to a larger public. In the recruitment and selection of participants, our aim was to bring together the perspectives of people with potentially contrasting positioning within the discursive space. The project included 30 participants: 13 were refugees in search for a job, 10 were native Dutch (mainly professionals from Dutch organizations that were making an effort to become more diverse), and 7 participants were professionals from Dutch organizations who also had a refugee background. Refugees were mostly chairs or key-members of refugee organizations concerned with (among other issues) the participation of themselves and their (minority) group in the labor market. Many of them had difficult experiences finding a job in Dutch organizations that met their level of education or with feeling at ease within them once they secured a job. Refugees participants all mastered well the
Dutch language, and were able to read the literature we selected in this language. Native Dutch participants were mostly managers from Dutch organizations concerned with making their organizations more diverse. In some cases, these organizations were specifically interested in refugees. The motives of the third category professionals with a refugee background were similar to those of the ‘native’ Dutch professionals: to acquire more understanding of dealing with diversity issues. The reason we chose to include refugees as a category was that this project was proposed by us in the context of a broader empowerment project designed to enhance the possibilities for refugees to find suitable work in the Netherlands.

**Working method**

Participants were asked to read the relevant literature, which was discussed during an intensive introductory session and was followed up on in the next sessions. This literature was selected by the researchers and was in Dutch. For the second session, participants were divided into small teams, which worked together in workshops around one specific theme concerning the management of diversity in organizations and the participation of minorities in the labor market. All teams worked together during the time span of one month, meeting several times. We participated in these sessions and made notes. We observed the dynamic and the discussions of all the teams. Every group formulated a specific issue or problem in the context of its theme, based on its discussions. The outcome of the discussions would then shape the content of the presentation for the plenary session. During the intensive weekend-sessions, the presentations of the teams functioned as a starting point for discussion. In the next sections, we present the dominant discourses which served as the framework within the project in addition to the discussion on creating space before presenting the findings of our research.

**Discursive framework**

*Identifying dominant diversity discourses in the Dutch context*

In order to provide participants with instruments to analyze their position towards each other in a historic context, the first type of literature we selected and discussed, was literature that offered a socio-historical analysis of the position of migrants and, in particular, refugees in the Netherlands. This historical understanding is important because it informs and shapes the present discourses on migration in the Netherlands. The growing negative discussion about migrants in most European countries in general, and in the Netherlands in particular, is one of the dominant discourses which, in our view, prevents balanced interactions between migrants and natives in their host societies (Essed & Trienekens, 2008).

The dominant discourse on migration in the Netherlands has shifted several times in recent decades. In the 1970s, it focused on the preservation of migrants’ cultures as separate elements tolerated within Dutch society. The idea was that the so-called ‘guest labor’ migrants would eventually return to their homelands, so there was no need for them to integrate. Postwar economic growth and the need for unskilled labor forced the Dutch government to look beyond its borders, fostering labor contracts first with Italy and Spain in the late 1950s and later with Turkey and Morocco. In the 1980s, the Dutch government shifted its policy regarding guest workers when it realized that this ‘temporary’ migration had gained a more permanent character and the status of this group changed
to ‘(im)migrant’ (Lutz, 1997, p. 99). With this realization, policies shifted toward integration into Dutch society while simultaneously preserving the migrants’ own cultures. This meant much more attention for developing language skills and encouraging the equal participation of migrants in society. At present, the dominant discourse constructs the culture and religion of migrants (Islam, in particular) as a source for broad societal problems (Gordijn, 2010, p. 222). The growth of the anti-Islam party, Partij voor de Vrijheid (Party for Freedom) in the Netherlands, as well as political movements in other European countries, shows a growing negative connotation of migration in the dominant discourses of these countries. In Dutch migration policy the culture of migrants has always been seen as absolutely different from the Dutch norm and the competencies of migrants have been viewed as lacking in comparison to those of average Dutch citizens (Essed, 2002). This dichotomy of the Dutch self and the migrant other has been the most persistent notion throughout the years in spite of changes in Dutch policies (Ghorashi, 2010).

In addition to the general Dutch discourse on migrants as the absolute other, there are specific discourses about refugees which go beyond the Dutch context. Refugees are often perceived as helpless victims, in need of the compassion of the host country because of violence and suppression (Harrell-bond, 1999). Many studies show that in different European countries these images can be quite harmful to refugees who want to build a new life and be considered as competent (Ghorashi, 2005; Muus, 1997). The negative effect of these discourses becomes even stronger when refugees have spent years in asylum seeker centers. During those years refugees are not allowed to do anything other than wait for the decision on their asylum. This often results in lowered self-esteem and increased psychological problems (Geuijen, 2000). These years of uncertainty and passivity have a decisive negative impact on the self-image of refugees, which makes their preparation for a proper job almost impossible.

**Dutch diversity discourses in organizations**

The second type of literature we selected offered an overview of discourses on diversity in organizations in the Netherlands (among other, we selected texts from the handbook by Glastra, 1999). In their study within the Danish context, Holvino and Kamp (2009) found that within the specific context of the European welfare state diversity issues are focused on moral obligations to care about ethnic minorities as vulnerable groups. This is one of the reasons for the prominence of a deficit approach of diversity in organizations in those countries. Lack of qualifications among (ethnic) minorities is seen as the main reason for the exclusion from the workforce. The main argument is that when members of ethnic minorities improve their skills they will be able to participate in the labor market on an equal basis (Essed & Nimako, 2006; Glastra et al., 2000). In this way, the notion of a ‘norm employee’ has often been related to quality and availability. The norm employee is assumedly a ‘disembodied worker,’ without gender or ethnicity. This point of view has met with much criticism from scholars of gender and race studies. Acker (1992), for example, shows that this seemingly neutral notion of the ‘disembodied worker’ is anything but neutral: it is gendered. Various scholars have shown that the norm employee has a specific ethnicity or race: the dominant one (Essed, 2002; Prasad & Prasad, 2002). Gowricharn (1999) argues that the construction of the norm is influenced by culturally and somatically desired images existing within organizations, which contribute to certain processes of inclusion or exclusion within organizations leading to differing access to (power) positions. These studies show that the construction of images of otherness has both a horizontal division of difference and a normative
aspect which presents the other as inferior (Prasad & Prasad, 2002). It is not accidental that top
positions are filled primarily by men of dominant ethnicities, while women and ethnic minorities
face a ‘glass ceiling’ in their careers.

Making space for the other

The literature on diversity issues discussed in the group enabled participants to contextualize their
experiences and think about their positioning within these discourses. Additional literature was
used as needed to provide the necessary conditions for interaction. Inspired by Janssens and
Steyaert (2001), we conceived these conditions in terms of creating space for reflection. In our
approach, this endeavor assumed two dimensions.

The first dimension concerned the individual level, that of interpersonal encounter, and
communication. To address this level we worked with the concept alterity: approaching the other
from the position of the other. Alterity is the core concept of the third chapter of the book by
Janssens and Steyaert (2001) that we read together. In that chapter, the authors—inspired by the
work of Serres—suggest that to achieve ‘alterity’ we need ‘to step to the side’ in order to make
space. Through ‘taking a step aside,’ it becomes possible to overcome, to a certain extent, the self-
evident power of the dominant discourse. It is exactly this temporarily emptied interspace that
enables unexpected new connections of perspectives. Stepping aside means moving into the
margins of power in order to create space for the voice of the other and one’s own voice from the
perspective of difference, rather than conforming to the dominant norm. This distance and
distancing from ‘the center’ can create novel ways for relating to the other. By giving up one's
position, one at the same time ‘gives way’ and ‘giving way’ prevents people from becoming ‘tied’
into positions of power (Serres in Janssens & Steyaert, 2001, p. 106). Stepping to the side becomes
like dancing. Dance becomes the metaphor not only for giving way but also for creating new
meeting grounds away from the power play at the center. Resisting dominant discourses and
providing new alternative discourses is not an easy task. It is not one that can be accomplished
solely at the individual level.

The second dimension concerned the level of group dynamics in relation to organizational practices.
This meant creating collective spaces to allow the emergence of different voices that countered
dominant definitions. We conceived of this as giving space to the emergence of new discourses
centered on self-definitions rather than reproducing or re-acting to positionings determined by the
dominant discourse. ‘Creating safe space’ as resistance (Collins, 1991) introduces a clear distance
from ‘the center’ through which individuals get the chance to position themselves through
difference. The strategies of resistance of American black women described in the literature on
black feminism serves as an inspiring example. These women used a variety of means to create a
safe space, including oral self-narration of the past, literature and music, and particularly Jazz and
Blues (Janssens & Steyaert, 2001).

Providing narratives against the mainstream

This interplay of the theoretical and practical framework of the project permitted various
perspectives to come into play before discussions became heated. This led to some intriguing
moments such as when the refugees shared narratives of the past and present. The following
example shows one of the experiences shared and analyzed during a plenary session. It was brought up by Ziba, a participating Dutch professional with a refugee background who was now building a flourishing career in the Netherlands. During the course of a job interview, which quite naturally made the participant nervous to begin with, the participant was asked, ‘Who do you detest most in the Netherlands?’ This question was asked in a context in which many politicians had become quite vocal about their anti-migrant positions. She felt uneasy responding, but instead of being reactive or passive, she found a way to turn the question around. Ziba responded that instead of naming the person she detested most, she preferred to name the person who inspired her most. She named the Dutch Crown Princess Maxima. In analyzing this episode together, participants from both majority and minority groups could see the negative impact of the dominant discourse that frames the position of migrants from Islamic countries as either loyal to their own country or to the Netherlands. By refusing to accept the difficult position in which she was placed, Ziba chose to engage in a positive discourse and so mastered the situation instead of becoming its victim. By turning the negative question into a positive one, she also opened a ‘space’ for the committee to look at her from a different perspective. She got the job. Through sharing their experiences and contextualizing them within a broader framework, participants helped each other to think of alternative forms of action to pursue in these kinds of presumably dead-end situations.

Other participants shared their frustration about their lack of understanding of where to start to change the negative discourses that seem so omnipresent. In analyzing and reflecting upon these experiences, a constant effort was made to avoid the dichotomizing discourse that constructs difference in terms of diametrically opposed groups (‘us’ versus ‘them,’ refugees versus nonrefugees, migrant versus Dutch). The presented experiences were then used to make connections among a variety of identity angles. For instance, the experience of Leyla, a refugee who shared her experience of exclusion or nonbelonging was linked to that of Sylvia, a native Dutch woman who told of feeling a sense of nonbelonging in a country seen as her natural home. Along with enabling these kinds of unexpected connections, the project provided the possibility to contextualize the narratives within societal/historical developments and analyze them through the provided theoretical lens. Participants tried to deconstruct not only preconceived images of the other by linking them to these broader frameworks, but also images of the self were challenged.

*Forgotten stories come alive*

Understanding the impact of the dominant discourses on one’s own life narrative was one of the main objectives of the project. This is particularly well illustrated by the case of Sarah, a participant with a refugee background. Sarah participated in the team that explored emancipation and identity. What follows is an excerpt from the field notes of the first meeting, which one of the authors attended:

> **It's late afternoon and I'm sitting in a small room with the team Emancipation and Identity. The team includes two Dutch participants and three refugees. The group members decide to start by using their own life stories, telling each other about turning points in their lives that illustrate their strength/force. When Sarah, one of the refugee women, is asked to tell the group something about herself, her answer is: ‘I don't think I have such a story.’ After encouragement from the group to think about which aspects of her narrative she would consider as powerful or what would represent manifestations**
of power in her life, she remains silent. ‘I don't know,’ she confusedly answers after a while. The group faces the unexpected inability of all three refugee women to tell their stories. At first, this brings perplexity and confusion to the group. Explanations for this inability are sought initially in the cultural backgrounds of the women (all three come from eastern-African countries). They suggest that it might be because in their education they were taught not to talk about themselves. However, the puzzlement and even pain that the question: ‘What is your strength?’ seems to arouse in the refugee women suggests that there is something more at stake. Encouraged by the other participants, the refugee-women – who all know each other, having worked together as volunteers on various projects – start to help each other give shape to their stories. They suggest moments in the lives of the other in which her strength was visible and point to specific aspects of the professional and private lives of their colleagues. Cautiously, the women become more and more engaged in reclaiming their stories. Sarah ends up telling an astonishing story of herself as a young woman fighting for her freedom and that of other women in an oppressive, male-ruled environment in Eritrea, eventually joining the armed fight for the freedom of her country, leaving her family, social position, and daily certainties behind.

The choice of the group to start their work by telling one another fragments of their life stories was based on the specific approach of identity we introduced in the project. We defined identity as a narrative of the self: a dynamic process, a changing view of the self and the other that constantly acquires new meanings and forms through interactions with social contexts and within historical moments. As Stuart Hall put it: ‘identity emerges as a kind of unsettled space […] between a number of intersecting discourses’ (1991, p. 10). Therefore, identity, as a process of becoming, occurs through an intersection of various past and present discourses, which involve both elements of change and continuity. These intersecting discourses include a certain amount of tension between, in Wekker’s (1998) words, the images we have of ourselves and the images of us presented by the dominant culture. In other words, the tension is between the self-image and the attributed-image. Some groups in societies face more tension between their own self-image and the image of them produced by the dominant discourse.

We showed earlier how consistent and powerful the negative dominant discourse of migrants is in the Netherlands, constructing them as absolute others (see also Essed & Trienekens, 2008). In this context, emancipation refers to claiming agency in response to the dominance of these defining images in order to produce alternative narratives which are closer to one's own life experiences and images of the self. How can one account for the fact that refugee women who had once been political activists—who could recall a past in which they fought for ideals such as women's emancipation and the freedom of their country, who at one time believed in ideals and in the potential of their actions and personal sacrifices to bring about significant change—appeared incapable of narrating their life stories? This question together with Sarah’s story was presented in the plenary session and received a great deal of attention throughout. Sarah shared that during her stay in the Netherlands she had only heard negative responses to all of her questions: ‘No, you are not good enough,’ ‘No, your language needs to be improved,’ ‘No, you do not have the proper papers.’ Several years of constant repetition of these words caused Sarah to lose her self-confidence. We could not think of any stronger case to show how the power of discourse relates to one's positioning. The case was much more painful than we could imagine, yet the change of attitude we
perceived in Sarah and other participants seemed almost magical. The agency which palpably broke free in Sarah during subsequent meetings, because of her recovered self-definition as a political activist and a ‘fighter,’ was one of the most overwhelming impacts of our whole project. By highlighting the discursive positioning of Sarah in the group, a mirror was created for the native Dutch participants to see how different minority positions could be compared to their position as part of a majority group. The switch of perspective helped them to understand the experience of those constantly addressed as passive and in need of help, as well as the painful consequences of forgetting self-narratives.

Discussion and implications

An inclusive approach of diversity in and beyond organizations should mean organizing diversity so that differences are not neutralized but actually ‘make a difference’ (Janssens & Steyaert, 2001). This means questioning the normalization power of discourses informing the mind-set and practices regarding diversity. By putting the power of discourse at the center of our analysis, we showed that short-term policies will not be able to challenge the normalized mind-set in organizations. To change the mind-set of the organization, according to Roosevelt Thomas (1991), we need education. In his view, it is education that changes the way people think about things, while training focuses on how people do things. Education is necessary for a shift in mind-set in order to obtain an organizational environment which offers space for difference and provides new perspectives to approach situations. Creating safe space for reflection need not be limited to organizational space. Through connecting academic research with social work, we chose to engage in social intervention using alternative spaces to have an impact on the mind-set and practice of (potential) organizational members by providing tools to free themselves from the domination of normalizing discourses. These stories were produced through contrasting discursive positionings within the group and enabled different forms of empowerment. The case of Ziba shows how agency could be claimed in seemingly dead-end situations: an example of micro-emancipation. Ziba managed to breakdown the dynamics that put her in a subordinate position when she was forced into the role of someone whose loyalty must be tested. The case of Sarah showed how powerful the negative discourse could be and also how important making (safe) space was in order to revive forgotten and suppressed stories. It was within the interspace created in dialog with other participants (including the majority group) that Sarah found the possibility to reclaim her forgotten narrative of the self. The situations that made the space feel safe were the connections coming from opposing positions: for example, when Sylvia (native Dutch) shared her own feelings of homelessness after hearing Leyla's emotional story of nonbelonging to the Dutch society.

The situational approach, i.e., starting from creating interspace for interaction instead of from categorical discursive dichotomies, of the project made it possible for the participants to be seen as contributors who could present their experiences and narratives. Through this interactive project we realized three dimensions of empowerment as described by Sáenz de Ugate and Martin-Aranaga (2011, p. 456): (1) personal empowerment as the example of Sarah showed; (2) relational empowerment, through contrasting discursive positionings and enabling alternative forms of connection; and (3) collective empowerment, by creation of a collective sense of solidarity to change the negative assumptions regarding refugees within the society and in organizations. It remains to be seen how this sense of collective solidarity will provide a basis for durable action in
the future. What was achieved so far was a foundation for shared social responsibility (SSR) by creating common ground for change and individual possibilities for agency (see Sáenz de Ugarte & Martin-Aranaga, 2011 for more on SSR). Our project showed the importance of creating alternative spaces in order to make the normalizing effects of discourses on subject positions a point of discussion. Despite the small sample of our study, the intensity of the sessions and the particularity of our situational approach provides insights into the ways that a power sharing environment can be created through critical reflection. This is of particular importance in European welfare states where diversity issues become moral obligations positioning refugees and other migrant groups solely as the receivers of help. Sharing experiences based on contrasting positions in relation to dominant discourses enables individuals (both majority and minority) to partially and temporally free themselves from the taken-for-granted power of dominant discourses. This is of interest for individuals who have the potential and willingness to become agents of change in organizations and policy-making. Contrasting minority and majority positionings also allows a communal base for sharing responsibilities. These are major steps to make inclusive policies in all the fields in which inclusion is the ambition.
References


