

## Analysing human resource managers' discourse on diversity: A study in some Italian small and medium enterprises

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### ABSTRACT

The main aim of this paper was to investigate how diversity management was discursively constructed in the words of 10 human resource (HR) managers of Small and Medium Enterprises located in Apulia, South of Italy. Following a discursive approach to organizations and a critical and rhetorical methodological perspective, the study has taken into account how HR managers defined diversity, how their diversity discourses reflected existing managerial practices and underlying power relations, and how they reaffirmed or challenged those managerial practices and power relations. Specifically, diatextual analysis has been used to read the discursive data, as to catch the strict link between discourse, identity and context of talk. Results showed that most of the SMEs involved in the study were quite unfamiliar with diversity management and showed a rather theoretical approach to the topic. The discursive data collected highlighted an evident gap between the positive construction of workforce heterogeneity and the passive attitude showed in terms of HR management practices.

### KEYWORDS

discourse; organization; diversity management; HR practices

## Analizando el discurso acerca de la diversidad de los gerentes de recursos humanos: Un estudio en algunas pequeñas y medianas empresas italianas

### RESUMEN

El objetivo principal de este trabajo fue investigar cómo la administración de la diversidad fue discursivamente construida, en las palabras de diez gerentes de recursos humanos de Pequeñas y Medianas Empresas (PyMEs) ubicadas en Apulia, al sur de Italia. Siguiendo un enfoque discursivo de las organizaciones y una perspectiva metodológica crítica y retórica, el estudio tomó en cuenta cómo los gerentes de recursos humanos definen la diversidad, cómo sus discursos acerca de la diversidad reflejan prácticas de gestión existentes y las relaciones de poder existentes, y cómo ellas reafirman o desafían esas prácticas de gestión y las relaciones de poder. Específicamente, usamos análisis diatextual para leer los datos discursivos, para captar el vínculo estricto entre el discurso, la identidad y el contexto del habla. Los resultados muestran que la mayoría de las PyMEs consideradas en el estudio estaban bastante poco familiarizadas con la gestión de la diversidad y revelaron un enfoque más bien teórico acerca del tópico. Los datos discursivos recolectados destacan un evidente vacío entre la construcción positiva de la heterogeneidad de la fuerza laboral y la actitud pasiva revelada en términos de las prácticas de gestión de recursos humanos.

### PALABRAS CLAVE

discurso; organización; gestión de la diversidad; prácticas de gestión de recursos humanos

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## Introduction

Within the last decades, the cultural and discursive turn within social sciences has pushed scholars and practitioners to radically rethink the complexity of organizational agency (Cooren, 2004; Howard-Grenville, 2005; Cooren, Kuhn, Cornelissen & Clark, 2011; Wright, 2014). This turn has allowed shedding a light on the role played by the communicative practices not merely as a mean to exchange information, rather as a constitutive element of social and organizational life (Grant, Keenoy & Oswick, 1998; Oswick, Keenoy & Grant, 2000; Putnam & Fairhurst, 2001; Fairhurst & Putnam, 2004; Heracleous, 2006). Yet, within the current social and economical scenario, marked by growing insecurity and precariousness, organizational discourses and narratives do possess an even higher strategic value as for the development of the cultural models, which actually legitimize the versions of reality individuals use to reconstruct their organizational existence (Manuti & Mininni, 2013).

The investigation of how communicative practices are managed within the organizational context has an heuristic power that goes far beyond the attempt of simply understanding how social actors relate to each other and how do they cope with the organizational needs, since it allows to catch and analyze the sense-making dynamics which are the base for the organizational acculturation (Saks, Uggersley & Fassina, 2007). Through such complex dynamics each actor come in contact with pre-existing values and norms, make sense of them and develops new meaning that actually contribute to define one's own organizational subjectivity. Indeed, to investigate the communicative practices of the organization means to catch frailties and conflicts that feature the organizational life, to penetrate those power relations that define the formal and informal boundaries of the context, where people are engaged in claiming their personal view of the world. In view of the above, diversity management, which is currently becoming an incontestable pivot of organizational complexity, seemed to be one of the most appropriate discursive spheres, accounting for the sense-making that concretely shape organizational identity and its manifestations, namely Human Resource Management practices.

### Diversity management as a Human Resource (discursive) practice

According to the discursive turn in organization theory, organizations are "accomplished linguistically and are enacted discursively" (Kornberg, Clegg & Carter, 2006, p. 4). Through discourse, organizational members structure their experience of reality (Foucault, 1972) and make sense of their experience in doing so (Weick, 1995). Accordingly, "organizations are socially

constructed through acts of languaging which create situations, objects of knowledge, social identities of and relations between people and groups of people" (Fairclough & Wodak, 1997, p. 258).

In this vein, one of the most significant and sensitive discursive practice in organizations is Human Resources Management (HR) as long as it concretely deals with negotiating the power relations that are exercised through its discursive activities (Phillips & Hardy, 2002; Van Dijk, 2001; Fairhurst & Putnam, 2004; Coupland & Brown, 2004). Therefore, one of the main aims of HR function is that of managing work-group diversity.

Such emergence has become even more evident within the last decades, since recent legal, cultural, and demographic factors (e.g. globalization, multiculturalism, declining birth rates, equality initiatives) have changed the composition of organizations' work forces. They have become more varied than in the past, and research suggests they will be even more diverse in the future (Seymen, 2006). As a consequence of these changes and other shifts in industrial settings, employers, managers, and employees in organizations have been progressively required not only to be sensitive to intra and intergroup differences, but also to adopt policies and practices that are effective in coping with such changes (Bhadury, Mighty & Damar, 2000; Lavaty & Kleiner, 2001). Yet, diversity management includes administering social environments and systems, along with organizational climate and procedures. It also entails recognizing, being open to and utilizing human differences. The goal is to create a positive work environment for all employees (Berger, Soper & Foster, 2002), which of course is correlated with an array of positive outcomes (e.g. enhanced personal effectiveness, quicker solution of conflicts, a climate of fairness and equity, greater productivity on complex tasks, increased sales and profits and so on) as long as it is supported by a strategic management of organizational communication. Indeed, communication is a transversal resource for HR policies, addressed to construct and convey consensus and cohesion, to enhance collaboration, to shape worldviews and to define guidelines, in a word to manage the power relations which actually constitute an organization.

Hence, from a discursive perspective, power is not always exerted through obviously abusive acts of domination, but rather more pervasively by securing consent on norms, and habits that reflect unequal power relations as well as by conveying and guiding the sense-making process that actually substantiate organizational life (Fairclough & Wodak, 1997). Therefore, moving from such considerations, the present paper aimed at approaching texts as discursive practices, revealing the power inherent in the very constitution of concepts, objects, and subject positions.

To this aim, HR managers have been considered the official and formal voice of the organization. By talking about diversity, HR managers reaffirm their right to speak and construct diversity in ways that are functional to maintaining this privileged right at the expense of other organizational actors.

Accordingly, our first research question examined how HR managers concretely cope with diversity in their actual working context. We analysed how, from their privileged position, they value diverse employees and discuss the discursive implications of these representations. The local diversity discourses are realized by means of texts; however, they are more than texts. They also reflect the structures and practices that underlie those texts and their production (Fairclough, 1992). Discourses are therefore the product of social practices and must be understood in their social context. Hence, our second research question addressed the ways in which diversity discourses are constructed in the functioning of existing management practices. Through this perspective, the kinds of interventions managers carry out to manage a diverse workforce are reflected in the way they talk and think about diversity. Of course, this dynamic is also inspired by the official cultural address that the organization manifests toward the topic both in language and action. As well as it finally inspires and guide the organizational actors' sense making processes, communicative practices and behaviors.

Lastly, discourses are not only the product of social practices, but also the producer thereof. It is through the constitution and deployment of particular discourses that actors secure their (privileged) right to speak and maintain or challenge existing power relations (Phillips & Hardy, 1997). Consequently, our third research question explored the ways in which HR managers' diversity discourses contribute to reaffirming or challenging existing management practices.

## **The study**

### **Aim and objectives**

The main aim of the study was to investigate how diversity management was discursively constructed in the words of a group of small and medium enterprises (SMEs) HR managers working in the South of Italy. Attention was cast upon the context of SMEs for many reasons. First of all, because they actually cover the 99% of the whole Italian economy. Secondly, because most of the scientific literature produced on the topic has focused on the investigation of huge and multinational contexts. Finally, because generally SMEs show a scarce knowledge of Diversity Management as formal HR policy, though their workforce is quite composite. Therefore, from a discursive perspective, the study

aimed at investigating how HR managers dealt with a diverse workforce and in turn through their function how did they contribute to shape the cultural framework that featured ordinary employees' exchanges and relations.

### **Participants**

Participants were 10 SMEs located in Apulia, in the South of Italy. Each enterprise has been represented by the HR manager or alternatively by the owner of the company, to whom a narrative interview has been administered.

The sample of SMEs was developed starting from three basic criteria: (i) the number of employees, (ii) the commodity sector of and (iii) the territory where the company is active. The number of employees has been very useful as to classify companies as small or medium enterprises; the commodity sector and the territory have allowed to differentiate the sample and then to make it more representative.

The SMEs selected belonged to the following commodity sectors: building, wholesale electric stuff, software development and consulting; press and publishing; textile and fashion; training; chemical production; urban solid litter collection, transportation and disposal; food production and conserve.

As for the territories involved by the study, the SMEs considered were located in the nearby to Foggia, Bari and Lecce, in the Apulia Region-South of Italy. Therefore, the sample was considered as much representative of the SME's HR policies within the local context.

### **Procedures**

Data have been collected by administering to all participants a semi-structured narrative interview, aimed at reconstructing the organizational culture with specific reference to any HR experience and practices addressed to manage workforce diversity.

The interview guideline encompassed four main topics: (i) the organizational context and the diversity workforce composition, (ii) organizational attitude toward diversity, (iii) perceived pro and contra of diversity in the organization and (iv) training and development initiatives with reference to diversity management.

The first topic was addressed to collect information about the organizational workforce composition as to understand what kind of diversity (e.g. gender, nationality, religion, disability, age, etc.) was prominent in each context of investigation and how did the organization concretely manage with such diversity (e.g.

diversity management policies, diversity management practices and initiatives, etc.).

The second topic was referred to the organizational attitude toward diversity. It was aimed at investigating both the employer's and the employees' perception of diversity within the organizational context.

The third topic was connected with the perceived pro and contra of diversity in the organization. It focused on the advantages and disadvantages of being a diverse workforce in terms of HR management.

Finally, the last topic was referred to training and development initiatives with reference to Diversity Management. It aimed at reconstructing what did the companies involved have done in the past or planned to do in the future as to manage a diverse workforce.

**Data analysis**

The discursive data collected were examined adopting a diatextual analysis which is a special address within discourse analysis aimed at catching the nexus between texts, interlocutors' identity and context of talk. Indeed, the diatext is "the context as it is perceived by the enunciators of the text, as they imagine it and show that they take it into account" (Mininni, 1992, p. 63). As a consequence, diatextual analysis is based on the interpretation of texts, whose aim is to increase the value of the spirit underlying communication. According to this perspective, sense does not reside permanently within texts; rather it goes through them as a result of the joint action of the enunciators, who negotiate the frame of the situation (stake) which they are actively involved in. The sense can be caught by answering to three basic questions: Who is saying that? Why does he/she say it? How does he/se say it? These questions organize the interpretative procedures of the SAM Model (Mininni, Scardigno & Rubino, 2008), since they suggest looking for a series of markers that identify subjectivity, argumentation and modality of discourses (Table 1).

**Table 1.**  
*Diatextual markers of the SAM model*

Questions of Diatextual Analysis	Dimensions of Diatextual Pregnancy	Diatextual Markers
Who is the utterer of the text?	Subjectivity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Agentivity: Any textual unit showing if the enunciator is source or goal of action;</li> <li>• Affectivity: Any textual unit highlighting the emotional dimension of texts;</li> <li>• Embrayage/debrayage: Any textual unit revealing whether the enunciator is involved or not.</li> </ul>
Why the text organizes its world?	Argumentation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Stake: Aims and interests animating the text;</li> <li>• Story: Scenes, characters, models of action;</li> <li>• Network: Logoi and antilogoi activated within the several narrative and argumentative programs</li> </ul>
How the text is built?	Modality	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Genre: Any reference to the typology of text and intertextual references;</li> <li>• Opacity: Rhetorical figures, frame metaphors, etc.</li> <li>• Metadiscourse: Any expressions of comment and reformulation.</li> </ul>

The first question aims at clarifying the way in which the text talks about its characters. More specifically, this first dimension of analysis accounts for the images that the enunciator elaborates of him/her self and of the others. Then, a diatextual researcher traces back each mark of the dialogue between the enunciative positions that (through the text) let the identity profile of the ideal author and of the ideal addressee come out.

The second question points out an axis of semiotic pertinence which allows discourse to articulate arguments, that is to organize meanings why, and to

give voice to reasons and aims which justify why one says something.

The third question focuses on the articulation of the dictum and of the modus of discourse according to which meaning is shaped, that is how it acquires a Gestalt quality which can be evaluated as good or bad, nice or naughty, effective or insipid etc.

Accordingly, the diatextual analysis of a specific communicative act aims at enhancing the pragmatic aspects of the meaning making process by trying to figure out its socio-epistemic rhetoric that is specific



constellations of meaning addressed at organizing the way through which individuals legitimize knowledge and values. Firstly introduced by Berlin (1985), the construct of socio-epistemic rhetoric (SER) aims at defining the range of expressive routines that highlight the epistemic and value systems. They actually legitimize the options of individuals and/or of groups. This construct has a heuristic value which is partly indebted to its own form that is grammar that is responsible for the expression and formulation. The order goes from the saying to the knowing passing through the social bond of being together and/or of being with the others. The word rhetoric evokes the concern for the word, which is a concern that the SER construct takes into account.

Yet, within diatextual analysis it is assumed that each object of social discourse (and the consequent process of sense making) could be shaped by the contrast between two socio-epistemic macro-rhetoric and by the contrast between the two implicit variants in their negation, according to what foreseen by semiotic square (Greimas & Courtès 1979). The main interest of this tool, aimed at organizing the interpretations deriving from diatextual analysis, is to be found in the contrast between some implicit options, as long as they exploit the basic dynamic of meaning modulation, that is the stylistic option of litotes, according to which it is preferable to say that something is non rich rather than saying it is poor.

In view of the above, the present study adopted diatextual analysis and the semiotic square as precious tools allowing understanding how diversity shapes and is shaped by managerial practices and their underlying power relations.

## **Results**

### ***Diversity Management in the SMEs of Apulia***

The analysis of the data collected allowed interesting considerations as for the discursive construction of Diversity Management which has emerged in the words of the HR managers interviewed.

Diatextual analysis supported the definition of the main discursive acts which have featured the discourse on Diversity Management. These are given by some strategic figures inside the companies, responsible not simply for the management of people and activities, but also for the definition of the cultural vision, which actually guides organizational sense making processes and practices. In this vein, coming to the theoretical background sketched at the beginning of the paper and arguing that discourse is at the same time a product and a producer of organizational experience, HR managers' discourses were analysed in the aim to unveil existing management

practices and underlying power relations, moving from the discussion about the perceived relevance attributed to Diversity Management.

This objective was mostly fulfilled by examining how HR managers tended to strategically construct a positive image of the company through discourse.

Yet, a first discursive act which featured the contributions was to describe one's own organizational context as the best place to work in. Pragmatically speaking, most of the managers interviewed were engaged in sketching a picture of the company as an enlightened context where human resources come always first. In this view, diversity management practices were described as a natural pivot of the organizational vision. This argumentative move was discursively constructed through the use of personal pronouns (I, we, our) and by the use of embrayage strategies, addressed to involve the interlocutor, to catch his/her attention and then to create a common emotional background, as shown by the following extracts.

'Yes, because employees play a fundamental role inside our company therefore to take care of their relationships and of their diversity is surely a relevant thing' (Medium-sized enterprise - Building).

'Yes, diversity cannot be left unmanaged [...] All employees are diverse in a sense [...] if you don't care about this aspect you cannot take the best out of them, this is for their personal interest, I am thinking about job satisfaction, professional growth, organizational climate and so on and for the interest of the company: better performance, higher attraction and talent retention and a stronger identification with the company' (Medium-sized enterprise - Software development and consulting).

'Yes, because the company is based on human resources even before than on economical capital' (Medium-sized enterprise - Textile and Fashion).

'According to me it is a benefit, it should be managed in the right way [...] to make it a resource you should devote time and then you have to plan how to enhance a resource, how to integrate him/her in the organization, you have to devote time to this resource otherwise it counts against' (Medium-sized enterprise - Training).

This communicative strategic aim was further followed while describing the concrete features of the companies, while illustrating the composition of the workforce.

Gender was the most evident diverse feature of the organizations considered. Almost all SMEs encompassed a composite workforce in terms of gender, a result which HR managers generally justified by making reference to the peculiarities of the commodity

sector and to a stereotypical view of work, which generally distinguishes male (e.g. manual work) and female preferred working activities (e.g. service work).

'I believe that in the world of professional training and in general in the world of human resource management women are more skillful than men since they have greater sensibility as it happens in the field of school and higher education where women are massively present but also in the company context the area of training and development is specifically suited to women' (Medium-sized enterprise - Training).

'Female manpower is fundamental for our typology of production that is fashion' (Medium-sized enterprise - Textile and Fashion).

As for Diversity Management interventions only six companies out of ten witnessed attention toward the needs expressed by those female workers, who were heavily engaged with family management and work-life balance. These companies adopted policies addressed to make work schedules more flexible, to allow part time work, and work shifts. In line with what observed earlier, these policies were also described as a merit of the organization. Accordingly, very interesting was how HR managers discursively constructed the agency of the actors involved in the debate: the company versus female workers. Female workers were posited in a one-down position, they asked the company to consider their needs and the company -which although is posited in a one-up position is very comprehensive- has allowed them to reduce the work schedule.

'[...] We have measures such as part time, demanded by women and flexible work schedule for mums at last we have extended these measures also to men but at the beginning it was addressed only to women then work schedule flexibility that is to come to work later is a measure we have considered in our guidelines' (Medium-sized enterprise - Training).

'[...] With respect to women who have a family we have allowed part time to those who have demanded it' (Small-sized enterprise - Chemical production).

'The company has always pandered to the needs of our female workers as for the demand of flexible work schedule, for the mums in primis, beside having planned the construction of nursery school inside the company' (Medium-sized enterprise - Textile and Fashion).

As for the management of other kind of diverse workforce, see for instance disabled workers and foreign workers, the experience told by the managers interviewed confirmed that in the sample of these SMEs, Diversity Management wasn't still a purposeful and strategic choice.

Indeed, the category of disabled workers was present in all medium enterprises and only in two of the small enterprises considered, that is in those with more than 15 employees as foreseen by the Italian Law 68/1999. Rather, this option was not actually an organizational policy; rather it was described as a mere formal accomplishment. In a similar vein, HR managers confirmed that the presence of foreign workers was not related to a strategic management of the organization rather it was quite incidental; because of the high technical skills and abilities possessed and useful for the company or because their recruitment was functional to a specific organizational need.

The investigation of the absolute relevance of Diversity Management in more general terms showed that almost all managers perceived as a very important priority for post-modern organizations, at least in theory. Yet, discursively speaking once more managers were engaged in catering to the ideal interlocutor, and thus in giving mostly social desirable answers, trying to fulfill a prophecy about their reputation. This discursive act was supported also by the use of debrayage strategies that were basically oriented at keeping the debate at a more general level, diffusing the responsibility of managing diverse workforce among SMEs. This move was evident in the recurrent use of impersonal contributions while talking about how a company should behave with reference to diversity management.

'Diversity management is advantageous. It is necessary since it depends on the mission that a company follows from an ethical point of view [...] it should not be the main concern but it should be a concern [...] Companies, beside their being small or medium-sized should take into account the issue of diversity since this issue is considered by most companies strictly from a juridical point of view and never from an ethical point of view, almost never companies take into account this issue as a social issue [...] therefore it is quite worthwhile and probably necessary not only from the point of view of the company's productivity but from a social point of view that should be considered as to avoid the discriminations that actually happened [...] the confrontation with diversity enriches people from a personal point of view and enhance also the personal nature' (Medium-sized enterprise - urban solid litter collection).

This quite abstract attitude toward Diversity Management was further amplified when managers were asked to express themselves with reference to the employees' reactions and perceptions of a diverse colleague. Some HR managers were worried about the prejudices which could be showed by the personnel against a diverse workforce.

On the other hand, nine HR managers out of ten declared that according to them diversity was a benefit, a resource and not a problem. Nonetheless, this result was not completely supported, as long as many of them attested that their companies did not adopt diverse management policies.

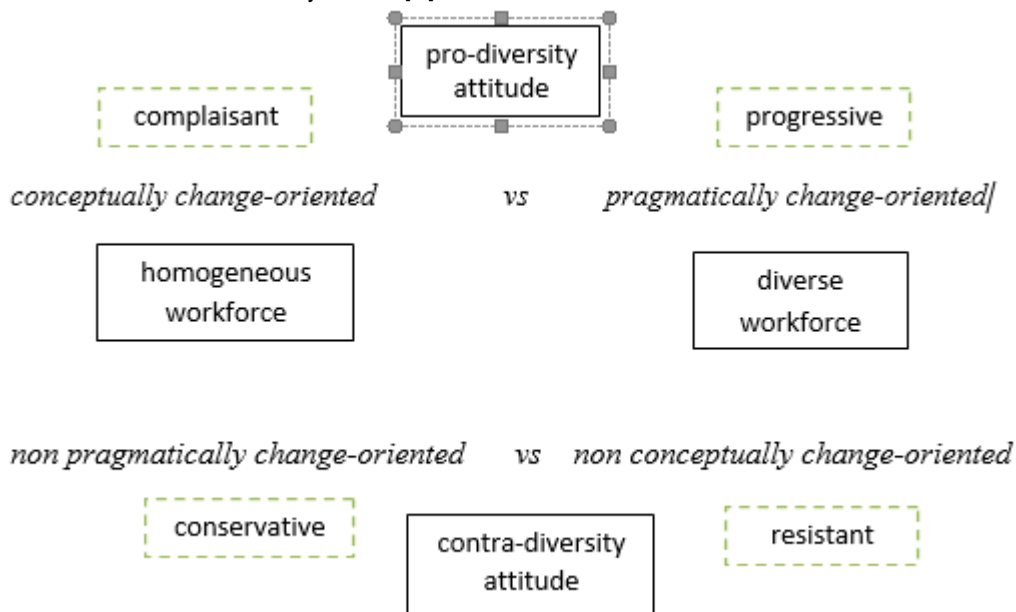
According to the participants, diversity could be a positive feature of the organization on condition of the commodity sector and of the number of diverse people working in the organizational context. They tended to project on the employees their resistance to diversity management. Then in this case the most evident discursive act was that of justifying.

'It depends on the extent that is with no doubt if there is a common starting point from a cultural point of view organizational life is easier, it is easier to communicate and to develop shared organizational policies [...] if heterogeneity in the workforce is excessive it becomes more problematic and specifically with reference to this reality that is for a production company [...] at least the linguistic factor is important, that is to communicate between a workman and a foreman speaking two different languages could be very hard this problem could be solved if I have only one foreign workman but what if foreign workmen are 10 or 15 coming from different countries [...] this would be a problem [...] it becomes a problem depending on the amount of diverse people in the working context and on the commodity sector [...] in

service companies where workers are high educated I don't think this could be a problem, rather it is surely a treasure but in a production company surely to have a diverse workforce is a resource but pragmatically speaking this is the work which should be done and there is very few to create [...]' (Medium-sized company - Press and Publishing).

As to sum up the results coming out from diatextual analysis, the semiotic square (Greimas & Courtes, 1979) was adopted as to allow the organization of the discursive identity profiles toward diversity management as emerged from the managers' words.

The most salient dimensions identified in the analysis were respectively the HR managers' attitude toward diversity management (pro-diversity versus a contra-diversity) and the actual workforce composition of the enterprise (homogeneous versus a heterogeneous workforce). Moreover, always with reference to the topic of Diversity Management, by crossing these dimensions, results allowed to identify a basic contraposition between companies that manifested themselves to be conceptually change-oriented and companies that were pragmatically change-oriented (Figure 1).



**Figure 1.** *The semiotic square of Diversity Management in organizations*

The analysis of the qualitative features of the discursive contributions emerging from the semiotic square produced four identity profiles, each related to specific peculiarities of the organizational contexts investigated and accounting for the managers' attitude toward Diversity Management.

The upper part on the left of the semiotic square, crossing a pro-diversity attitude, a homogeneous workforce composition, and a conceptually change-oriented position of the managers involved, allowed defining a complaisant discursive profile. This profile was featured managers working in small enterprises. These companies generally employ less than 15 workers and therefore have few demands in terms of diversity management. Therefore, this discursive profile accounted for a social desirable attitude, agreeing with a positive consideration of diversity within the workplace, but only in theoretical terms since the homogeneous composition of the actual workforce had never pushed managers to concretely cope with these demands. This position conveyed a rather stereotypical view of diversity, which was not actually experienced on the job. Discursively speaking, this profile was featured by a recurrent use of debrayage strategies and uncertainty markers (as for instance the use of modals in the following example), that concretely conveyed caution and hesitation toward the actual adoption of such policies.

'When different cultures, different genders come in contact, different ways of thinking are produced, there should be a greater creativity and from this debate new ideas could come out' (Small-sized enterprise - transportation and disposal).

On the opposite side of the upper part of the square, crossing still a pro-diversity attitude, but a diverse workforce composition and a pragmatically change-oriented attitude, a "progressive" discursive profile emerged. This was typical of managers working in medium-size companies, concretely engaged in coping with diversity as a complexity organizational factor. In this case, discourses on diversity management were featured by the recurrence of certainty and involvement markers such as attitude meta-discursive markers (e.g. use of personal pronouns, static verbs, etc.), specific modality markers (e.g. hedges, intensifiers, etc.) and embrayage strategies, addressed to convey a personal identification and cohesion with the official organizational mission and vision. The positive attitude toward diversity was framed into an actual experience of cohabitation with diversity and thus was based on a concrete orientation toward organizational change and development in terms of human resource management.

'We have adopted a gender and cultural equality policy both inside and outside the company, since the

percentage of the workers who work outside the company is higher than that of those who work inside it [...] then we have the moral and juridical obligation to respect this policy, to adopt a specific behavior, as long as this behavior should be confirmed also while interacting with customers outside the company, since we could come in contact with foreign people, with disabled people and so on, therefore we have a quite rigorous code' (Medium-sized company - Training).

Moving to the lower part of the semiotic square, the discursive profiles that emerged from the interviews expressed a negative attitude toward diversity. Hence on the left, crossing contra-diversity attitude and homogeneous workforce composition, the profile of the conservative company emerged. This is the case of few small enterprises that aimed at keeping the *status quo* among workers. Generally this category of managers saw diversity as a potentially threatening factor for the organizational climate. Diversity could produce conflicts and conflicts could act negatively on job performance. This position was discursively constructed mostly through the use of debrayage strategies aimed at generalizing the debate on diversity and at keeping it at a distance. As showed in the extract below, in this case, diversity was constructed as a cost for the organization, both from the economical and from the HR perspective. Therefore this position aimed at conveying the idea that the limits are certainly more than the benefits associated with such choice that is why to keep things the way they are is always the best solution according to the participants involved in the study.

'To manage diversity produces certainly problems linked with human resource management, as long as this means that anyway someone should spend a part of his/her time and of his/her working day to this issue and this means that some economical and human resources should be devoted to this aspect [...] (Small-sized enterprise - Chemical production).

Finally the last quarter of the square, the lower part on the right, defined the identity profile of the resistant company, featured by a contra-diversity attitude as long as its workforce composition was diverse. This discursive identity was characterized by the conscious acknowledgement that diversity was an organizational feature that cannot be avoided. Accordingly, HR management of such contexts resulted very difficult, so much that the policies adopted to cope with such difficulties weren't still perceived as part of the cultural vision of the company. This profile was typical of those medium-sized companies whose diversity management practices were thought as an immediate problem solving action rather than as a planned and shared organizational strategy. Such attitude was discursively constructed through narrative and affectivity markers aimed at reconstructing the organizational experience with reference to diversity management in terms of



problem to be solved, rather than as a challenge for the organizational development.

'From the professional point of view in our case the presence of a composite workforce is not a benefit [...] according to me a homogenous workforce produces bigger advantages since it produces bigger harmony [...] (Medium-sized enterprise - Food production and conserve).

'Until now we have experienced four pregnancies and then four maternity leaves, that I assure you for a medium-sized enterprise like our company is not a trivial thing and it is not a question to neglect [...] we have had to employ temporary workers as to cope with these four cases and the last two have really brought us on the knees [...]' (Medium-sized company- Press and Publishing).

### Concluding remarks

The analysis of the discursive data collected have contributed to show that HR managers' discourse about diversity could be an informative tool to investigate the sense making processes that concretely inspire the organizational cultural view of the organization, HR management policies and consequently individual and organizational behavior as well.

Yet, results coming from diatextual analysis showed that most of the SMEs involved in the study were quite unfamiliar with Diversity Management. Though discursively constructed as an advantage and as a value for the organization, in most of the companies involved, diversity resulted to be quite neglected in the concrete actualization of human resource practices. Indeed, since gender seemed to be the most evident workforce diversity feature in this sample of Apulian SMEs, it was considered as a natural trait of organizations which did not need any special kind of attention on behalf of HR management. As a consequence, no specific initiative, beside the most traditional job flexibility measures, was engaged to cope with such diversity demand and therefore no strategic plan was developed as to enhance competitiveness and organizational change. Accordingly, it could be reasonably argued that the workforce employed in these contexts would be hardly inclined to display and/or to develop personal attitudes and behaviors open to diversity as long as these are not recognized as part of the official organizational culture.

Yet, the result that came out clear from the interviews was that Apulian SMEs actually consider diversity as a theoretical and not as a concrete benefit that owes also significant economical advantages. There was an evident gap between the positive discursive construction of workforce heterogeneity and the passive attitude showed in terms of HR management practices.

The adoption of the discursive approach and namely of the psycho-semiotic methodological option of diatextual analysis has showed to be fully attuned with differentialism, which is a worldview aimed at enhancing difference, at granting multiple sense-making paths to interpret diversity. Accordingly, the analysis of the discursive contributions of the managers has allowed framing diversity management as alterity, as inequality, as not being contemporary and as not being measurable (Mininni, 2013). These four interpretative repertoires of diversity basically identify and resume the cultural attitudes showed by our participants toward diversity.

For a small part of the managers interviewed a diverse workforce is a synonym for otherness. This quite positive view of diversity as alterity implies a (re)consideration of what identity is. Indeed, according to this (philosophical) perspective, identity is not a monolithic whole. It is what it is thanks to its being different from the others. Then its meaning is to be found in the stream of becoming, a mixture between being and not being, which makes each identity actually unique. As a matter of fact, this group of participants largely shared a positive view of diversity, highlighting the necessity to consider this feature mostly as a benefit for the organization.

On the other hand, most of the participants described diversity in negative terms, as a synonym for inequality, for something that is not completely attuned with the mainstream organizational culture and then as something that is very difficult to catch and to understand in its complexity. In this vein, most managers acknowledged their difficulty in relating to diversity within the workplace. They described diversity as a gap to fill in rather than as a resource to enhance, striking that although the individual and organizational attempt to accept and integrate diversity, this would always represent a possible obstacle to communication and to interaction.

Finally, although explorative in nature, the study contributed to extent the knowledge about the HR management policies adopted by some most representative small and medium enterprises in the South of Italy, as well as about the managers' representation of diversity in the workforce.

Nonetheless, the study showed at least two main limitations. First, the study analysed only texts produced by managers. This did not allow for the investigation of whether and how employees concretely contribute to co-construct an organization's discourses of diversity. Future research may benefit from a more dialogical approach to diversity discourse. Second, the findings of the study reflect the methodological choice to analyse diversity discourses across organizations. A more in-depth analysis of one organization may offer additional

insights into the mutual relationship between discursive and other management practices. Cultural and ethnographic studies could better support a not merely discursive reading of diversity, showing how and to what extent these practices may reinforce or challenge the power relations inside the organization. Yet, if diversity research is meant to overcome a mostly managerial perspective and to promote practices that truly value differences within equality, it will need to address critically the role of power in the construction of difference and its managerial use.

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