# Unveiling Differences

An exploration of workplace diversity discourses, practices and identities in nonprofit organizations

Faculty of Social Sciences

Department of Sociology

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An exploration of workplace diversity discourses, practices and identities in nonprofit organizations

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to be defended by

Sara Elloukmani

Supervisors

Prof. dr. Peter Raeymaeckers

Prof. dr. Stijn Oosterlynck

**Doctoral Advisory and Examination Committee**

| | |
|---|---|
| Supervisors | Prof. dr. Peter Raeymaeckers, University of Antwerp |
| | Prof. dr. Stijn Oosterlynck, University of Antwerp |
| Chair | Prof. dr. Mieke Schrooten, University of Antwerp |
| Members | Prof. dr. Patrizia Zanoni, Hasselt University |
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| | Prof. dr. Lore Van Praag, Erasmus University Rotterdam |

*In loving memory of Khadouj Amɣar (1938-2023) and Tamimount Ourali (1939-2022)* الله يرحمهم

Cover illustration: *I see you in the sea of you* by Daehyun Kim (Moonassi)

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# Summary

Over the past decades, nonprofit organizations have experienced significant growth in terms of their societal and economic importance. As increasingly indispensable providers of social and cultural services, they account for significant shares of overall employment and social and economic capital creation in many parts of the world. However, scholars have observed how the composition of nonprofit workforces is largely stratified according to ethnic, gender and social class differences, a finding that stands in stark contrast with the stature of nonprofits as upholders of civic participation and social engagement.

In this dissertation, I question how workplace diversity is put to work in Flemish nonprofit organizations. In Flanders, the nonprofit sector unmistakably deals with a skewed workforce representation, especially in terms of ethnic differences. Building on insights from critical and poststructuralist diversity studies, this dissertation aims to contribute to the literature by examining the context and processes through which differences are established in nonprofit organizations. It more specifically rests on the assumption that the ways in which differentiation in terms of 'diversity' is made, is strongly embedded in the characteristics of nonprofit organizations and the positioning of actors in it. Thus, highlighting the specificity of the sector, I unravel how diversity is conceptualized and mobilized, how it is incorporated and accommodated in organizational environments and how it relates to the construction of individual identities within the organizational context. In doing so, I aim to address to emerging challenges facing diversity literature, that is, highlighting the importance of context and the situated nature of identities.

Drawing on in-depth interviews with leaders and employees of nonprofits, my analysis shows how discourses on diversity are not necessarily managerially driven – as is often assumed in extant literature – but rather strongly entwined with nonprofits' governance mechanisms. An in-depth narrative analysis of two welfare organizations, furthermore, reveals the broader institutional framework through which diversity may be introduced and installed in the organization. This, on its turn, may allow us to understand why differences are constructed as predetermined and centered around ethnic and religious differences or as self-informed and centered around multiple and dynamic identities. These varying and contextually contingent interpretations of diversity, therefore, have important consequences for how identities are negotiated in the workplace and how power is established within that context. The central premise of this dissertation is that context matters in terms of power and as an important condition of possibility in which particular kinds of difference are constituted.

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تَوْفِيقِىٓ إِلَّا بِٱللَّهِ ۚ عَلَيْهِ تَوَكَّلْتُ وَإِلَيْهِ أُنِيبُ

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# Table of contents

**Summary** I

**Acknowledgements** II

**Introduction** 1

The making of 'diversity': between economic and moral-ethical perspectives 3

Diversity in nonprofit organizations 8

Flanders' civil society and nonprofit organizations 11

Ethnic occupational stratification 13

Research questions and overview 16

Research methodology 19

**Chapter 1: Diversifying the workplace in nonprofit organizations: discourses and perspectives on ethnic diversity** 47

Introduction 47

Diversity beyond business and social justice rationales 49

Diversity perspectives and nonprofit governance 51

Method 56

Results 59

Conclusion 66

**Chapter 2: Understanding diversity in nonprofit organizations: an institutional logics perspective** 69

Introduction 69

Workplace diversity and the institutional logics approach 71

The (plural) institutional logics approach and workplace diversity 72

Method 74

Results 76

Conclusion 89

**Chapter 3: Making differences (in)visible: Identity work and power dynamics in welfare organizations in Belgium** 93

Introduction 93

Diversity, identity, and power in welfare organizations 94

Method 97

Results 99

Conclusion 109

**Chapter 4: Navigating essentialism in qualitative research on diversity: reflections of an ethnic minority researcher** **113**

Introduction 113

The research context 116

Navigating differences and dual social contexts 117

Results 119

Conclusion 127

**Concluding reflections** **133**

Unveiling differences in Flemish nonprofit organizations 134

Navigating differences in nonprofit organizations: what's next? 144

A reflexive note 153

**References** **157**

**Appendices** **174**

Appendix I: Letter of invitation 177

Appendix II: Ethical clearance forms 178

Appendix III: Questionnaire round 1 180

Appendix IV: Questionnaire round 2 184

Appendix V: Author contributions 186

Appendix VI: Dutch abstract 187

# PART I

# Introduction

This dissertation unravels the meaning of workplace diversity through the perspectives and experiences of leaders and employees in nonprofit organizations. It more specifically rests on the assumption that the ways in which social differences in terms of 'diversity' are made in the workplace, is strongly embedded in the characteristics of nonprofit organizations and the positioning of actors in it. Despite being a contentious term, the conceptualization and implementation of 'diversity' has most often been linked to various predefined socio-demographic categories (such as gender or ethnicity) that characterize minority employees (Janssens and Zanoni, 2021; Holck et al., 2016; Litvin, 1997). Within nonprofit and organization studies, these categories have been studied from numerous perspectives and theoretical frameworks, however almost exclusively as independent of their specific societal or organizational setting or context (Ahonen et al., 2014; Janssens and Zanoni, 2021; Kornau et al., 2021; Nkomo et al., 2019). Diversity, therefore, often remains a concept that is isolated from, for example, power relations within a specific society (Syed and Özbilgin, 2009) or only included against the classic 'business firm' backdrop (Janssens and Zanoni, 2021). It does not, for example, address the sector specific challenges nonprofit organizations are confronted with. Moreover, such an approach may also take the attention away for both researchers and practitioners from finding out how categories of difference are specific to a particular time and place and unveiling the processes that generate 'diversity', power, privilege, (dis)advantage, and inequality at work (see e.g., Kornau et al., 2021; Villesèche et al., 2018a: 38).

Studies addressing the importance of context in workplace diversity research are emerging, arguing that diversity does not occur in a vacuum, but rather exists in a multilayered environment were various organizational actors function (see e.g., Nkomo et al., 2019; Post et al., 2021; Janssens and Zanoni, 2021; Ahonen et al., 2014; Syed and Özbilgin, 2009; Zanoni and Janssens, 2015; Joshi and Roh, 2007). In fact, scholars have recently posited that diversity research is at a *critical juncture*, and have made calls for a diversification of diversity studies that include and combine macro level phenomena with micro level experiences of fluid and intersecting identities so as to offer nuanced multilevel analysis of diversity[1] (Nkomo et al.,

[1] The appeals for greater consideration to context and contextualization, is however not completely new in organization and management research and have in fact been around for over thirty years (see e.g., Bamberger, 2008; Cappelli, 1991). The calls for contextualization of workforce diversity research in particular, however, have been more recent with especially Joshi and Roh (2007; Joshi and Roh, 2009; Joshi and Roh, 2013) as prominent forerunners of bridging the gap between macro contexts, organizational approaches, and individual experiences.

2019; Just et al., 2021). This dissertation aims to empirically contribute to our understanding of diversity in the specific context of nonprofit organizations by concurrently answering the pertinent question of *where*, *when*, *how* and *why* differences emerge in the workplace (Post et al., 2021).

Drawing on qualitative research methods, this dissertation therefore answers emerging calls for more attention to context and examines how and why leaders and employees of nonprofit organizations give meaning to diversity in the workplace as well as how various and complex organizational processes and characteristics in nonprofit organizations are intertwined with the process of categorizing and defining differences. Our attempt ultimately lies in capturing the phenomenon of workplace diversity as part of its societal, institutional and organizational context, allowing us to closely identify how differences and power dynamics emerge. The research questions addressed in each chapter of this dissertation (see research overview) shed light on four aspects of diversity in Flemish nonprofit organizations, including (i) its conceptualization and implementation, (ii) the incorporation of diversity in organizational environments, (iii) the construction of employees' identities within the organizational context, and (iv) the potential implications and challenges for diversity researchers. In doing so, it touches on epistemological and ontological disparities regarding workplace diversity: it addresses the knowledge and theories that inform our understanding of workplace diversity (i.e., how workplace diversity is conceptualized and what the underlying assumptions are) as well as who is included or excluded in that understanding, and the implications and consequences of these differentiations.

In this introduction, I situate four empirical studies on workplace diversity in nonprofit organizations by firstly sketching the broader societal and organizational background against which 'diversity' emerges in my research. I will do so by first setting out the theoretical outline on which this dissertation builds and situate it in the extant diversity research in management and nonprofit scholarship. I will, thereafter, delve deeper on the role of Flanders' civil society and nonprofit sphere. I more specifically lay out the characteristics of this sector and how it differs from the Anglo-Saxon tradition on which most studies are based. Subsequently, I will discuss the socio-historical context and occupational stratification in Belgium, emphasizing the socially constructed nature of salient categories of diversity and demonstrate why especially ethnicity is a relevant marker in this context. Finally, I will provide an overview of the subsequent chapters and lay out the research questions, approach, and methodology that informed them.

## The making of ‘diversity’: between economic and moral-ethical perspectives

The concept ‘diversity’ has a long history outside of the social sciences (see Litvin, 1997), but has nonetheless made a considerable imprint in the sociological imagination where it functions as a flux and slippery term. Broadly speaking, ‘diversity’ draws on social categories as analytical units or tools to understand the role of individuals who are portrayed as different from a norm (Risberg and Pilhofer, 2018). These categories, therefore, generally tend to be defined in terms of socio-demographic differences such as gender, race, or ethnicity, and other references to historically excluded groups and communities such as sexual minorities or people with disabilities. Drawing on these pre-established or ‘universal’ categories of difference allows researchers to apply them across different contexts. Tatli and Özbilgin (2012) refer to this as an etic approach to diversity, where categories like gender can be used to understand diversity in any setting. However, while this conceptualization has allowed for an exchange in understanding how diversity is managed across organizational settings, it does not thoroughly address where these categorizations come from in the first place (as well as how they relate to their setting) (Ahonen et al., 2014). To do so requires researchers to describe a particular setting in its own terms, i.e., the so-called emic approach. This approach views diversity as emergent and focuses on how categories of difference are specific to a particular time and place and how they may generate power, privilege, (dis)advantage, and inequality at work. Thus, unlike the etic approach, which adopts pre-established categories of difference as salient in new contexts, the emic perspective identifies emergent and situated categories of diversity retrospectively (Tatli and Özbilgin, 2012; Galperin et al., 2022). It is, moreover, particularly interesting to understand how differences in the workplace emerge in the nonprofit sector, where a logic of social change and community building is increasingly being enmeshed with a logic of the market. Nonetheless, the essentialist understanding of difference and the idea that specific groups have certain, fixed attributes remains an established groundwork for scholars and practitioners (Villesèche et al., 2018a) and is also reified by organizational actors (Zanoni and Janssens, 2015).

Before the staggering emergence of contentious ‘Diversity, Equity and Inclusion’ initiatives in public, private, and nonprofit organizations, the concept of ‘workplace diversity’ in terms of race/ethnicity, gender, or sexual orientation was long introduced by US civil rights and feminist movements (Zanoni et al., 2010). In the 60s and 70s, these movements plead for antidiscrimination and equal opportunities legislation and racial bias training, and succeeded in

doing so (Kelly and Dobbin, 1998). However, as US organizations were increasingly being pressed to deal with demographic and economic shifts since the 1980s and criticism of legally imposed organizational policies surged, the idea of multicultural diversity management covered more ground (Kelly and Dobbin, 1998; Zanoni et al., 2010). Organizations increasingly came to believe that ethnic/racial minorities and women would become the backbone of their economic success and rushed to launch diversity initiatives, hire diversity consultants, and offer an array of diversity training programs (Kalev et al., 2006). Subsequently, the idea of 'managing' diversity allowed organizations to voluntarily focus on difference and inclusion instead of discrimination, and take in difference as an organizational asset (Gotsis and Kortezi, 2014: 16; Ortlieb and Sieben, 2013). Thomas and Ely (1996) have identified this perspective to workplace diversity as an 'access-and-legitimacy' paradigm (as opposed to a discrimination-and-fairness paradigm) stating that it allows for not only race, ethnicity, and gender to be potential repositories of economic value for employers, but also religion, age, disability, and sexual orientation (Weisinger et al., 2016; Janssens and Zanoni, 2021). This innovative perspective allowed organizations to tap into new markets by matching diverse customers with a diverse workforce as well as improve organizational learning and creativity through employees' exposure to a wider range of perspectives, and increase organizational flexibility (Zanoni et al., 2010).

Diversity, once explicitly linked to a political project of empowerment by various social groups, thus now seemed to be depoliticized and largely associated with a managerially driven agenda, prioritizing organizational performance and potential. Over the past decades, the emergence of a 'business' approach to diversity gained immense popularity both for practitioners and scholars, spreading across Europe and permeating many organizations across sectors (Weisinger et al., 2016). From the 1990s onward, however, more research surfaced on the detrimental effects of this business approach (see Dobbin and Kalev, 2018; Noon, 2007), and critique emerged on the use of fixed and essentialist categories, the lack of attention to organizational and societal contexts in shaping diversity as well as the inadequate theorization of power (Zanoni et al., 2010). As Joshi and Roh (2007: 2) observed, 'research evidence demonstrating a business case for diversity is by and large equivocal […] in order to resolve this dilemma, researchers need to reframe current approaches to diversity research by engaging in more comprehensive considerations of the context of diversity'. Critical scholars, hence, problematized a managerial or business approach with the bottom line assertation that invoking diversity as if it was a human resource works to conceal the continuation of systematic inequalities within organizations and individuates difference (see Gotsis and Kortezi, 2015: for

an extensive overview). As such, they have contributed to countering the business perspective with a moral-ethical or social justice perspective.

This strand in diversity research has extensively explored how powerful actors in organizations contribute to both the explicit structures of inequality as well as the more informal, subtle substructures of inequality (e.g. Holck, 2016a; Romani et al., 2019). Drawing on institutional, postcolonial, and poststructuralist theories, a surge of critical scholars have succeeded in offering an understanding of how diversity is established within organizations in a manner that conceals unequal power dynamics (Zanoni et al., 2010). Critical scholars show, for example, how business approaches to diversity perpetuate systemic inequalities (Jonsen et al., 2021; Noon, 2007; Noon, 2018; Carrillo Arciniega, 2021), how these inequalities leads to (ethnic or racial) minorities being more prone to exclusion and identity threat (Kyere and Fukui, 2022; Foldy, 2003; Zanoni and Janssens, 2007; Zanoni et al., 2017), and how powerful organizational actors aim to establish and reproduce this status quo by engaging in defensive institutional work and repudiating diversity initiatives (Zanoni and Janssens, 2004; Roos and Zanoni, 2018; Knoppers et al., 2021; Thomas and Plaut, 2008; Acker, 2006; Meriläinen et al., 2009).

This research stream has proven to be valuable in *re*politicizing diversity and revealing how power is a structural component of society and social relations. However, scholars have more recently addressed some of the possible limitations of critical diversity research as well (Holck et al., 2016; Nkomo et al., 2019; Janssens and Zanoni, 2021). First, while critical contributions to the diversity literature highlight the depoliticization of diversity categorizations in business approaches, there is often a lack of empirical work and practical tools to support these theoretical insights. Or as put by Ahmed (2007b): 'if the work of critique does not show that its object can be undone, or promise to undo its object, then what is the point of that critique?'. Second, despite critiquing essentialist and fixed subject positions in business approaches on diversity, critical scholars often still describe minorities in terms of pre-defined and essentialist socio-demographic categories to unveil inequalities (Villesèche et al., 2018b; Holck et al., 2016). This categorization, however, is a process of power demonstration on itself or as put by Risberg and Pilhofer; "those determining the categories have the power to define the norm (what is counted as a difference, in relation to what?). They hold the power to decide what attributes of difference should be categorized." (2018: 136). The question that arises, then, is *how* does someone come to be diverse? This is what Ahonen and Tienari (2015) call the problem of ethico-politics:

> At the centre of the problem of ethico-politics of diversity is the question of the formation of the 'diverse subject', the person or a group of people who are 'diverse'. How do they come to be? […] 'Representation' relates not only to the representation of legitimate subjects in a given setting (how many women there are in top jobs in organizations, for example) but also how these subject are represent*ed*, that is how they appear, what characteristics they are given or understood to have. How and what characteristics are assigned to a subject is, again, also a question of ethico-politics. In the case of diverse subjects it is the production of diversity knowledge—by myriad means and by academics and practitioners alike—that produces the building blocks of diverse subjects. The ethico-political question here is the how of the making of the diverse subject.

Because of predefined categorizations, critical research can also produce another type of 'fixing' of subject positions by underplaying individual agency and reifying managers as being powerful and minority employees as powerless (or only able to offer micro-emancipation). This is of course not to say that context is not deemed important for critical diversity scholars – on the contrary – but rather that in producing knowledge, context too often belongs outside of the actual research itself and diversity related phenomena are still researched in isolation (McLaren and Durepos, 2021; Ahonen et al., 2014; Ahonen and Tienari, 2015). While such an 'etic approach' allows for attention to power differences and intersectionality in different contexts and is often done so in order to problematize and/or complicate categorization (Villesèche et al., 2018a; Just et al., 2021), in-depth understandings of other societal or organizational contexts is rendered difficult because of excessive structural determinism in locating power in the institutional framework[2]. Such an approach also takes the attention away for both researchers and practitioners from finding out how categories of difference become salient in a particular regional, national or organizational context (see e.g., Kornau et al., 2021; Villesèche et al., 2018a: 38). This particular limitation has been addressed by strands in the diversity literature that focus on identity work and negotiations in organizations, referring to the active process through which individuals construct, maintain, negotiate, and express their sense of self, both

[2] It is important to note, however, that several diversity scholars do recognize and address the socially constructed and emerging nature of salient categories of diversity in their context (Tatli and Özbilgin, 2012). Respectively using a Bourdieuan and relational approach for example, Tatli (2011) and Syed & Özbilgin (2009) address the contextual and multilevel character of diversity (management) by highlighting the national context in which it is embedded (see also Özbilgin, 2019; Özbilgin and Chanlat, 2017).

individually and in relation to social groups and contexts (see e.g., Alvesson et al., 2008; Alvesson and Willmott, 2002; Brown, 2015; Brown, 2022).

In conclusion, most critical research on diversity is still often limited by its focus on critique and lack of attention to emerging differences and empirical work aimed at developing practical tools and recommendations (Holck et al., 2016; Ahonen et al., 2014; Zanoni et al., 2020; Holck, 2018a). Extending on this critical scholarship, a growing body of researchers are therefore shifting attention to an 'emic' approach and are calling for more attention to context, situatedness, individual agency, identity work and researcher performativity in order to grasp the dynamic nature of 'diversity' as well as interrogate our performative role as researchers (Ahonen et al., 2014; Holck et al., 2016; Villesèche et al., 2018b; Plotnikof et al., 2022; Zanoni et al., 2017; Holck, 2018a). Greedharry et al. (2021) summarize this as follows:

> Where much of critical research is interested in understanding how people use, adapt, and deploy diversity language and practices, we argue for the need to identify the mechanisms, techniques, and processes by which difference appears to create a demand for, or assumption of diversity in the first place, as well as the need to identify the mechanisms, techniques, and processes by which difference becomes or is made governable, manageable, and accountable. Diversity research itself and its methods are part of this equation. (Greedharry et al., 2021: 20)

The role of context, however, in management studies has for the most part been obscured because of the diverse ways in which it may be defined and applied (Leitch and Palmer, 2010; McLaren and Durepos, 2021; Bamberger, 2008). Indeed, (critical) diversity scholarship in organization studies commonly takes 'the business firm' as a neutral setting where diversity is shaped and studied (and hence largely neglects nonprofit organizations) (Janssens and Zanoni, 2021), often does so in a Western context (Kornau et al., 2021) and with limited attention to reflection on one's positions in relation to others (Just et al., 2021). Especially in the setting of nonprofit organizations, an environment that aims to address issues of community building, (in)equality, and solidarity, our understanding of the (lack of) emancipatory potential in how these organizations regard diversity is yet to be understood. In fact, diversity studies taking place in nonprofit organizations are often imbued with economic meaning and seldom take into account the organization as an entity with its own specific characteristics (see e.g., Brimhall, 2019). While progress has however been made in this area (e.g., Zhao and Wry, 2016; Kornau et al., 2022; Just et al., 2021), empirical research is still in its relatively early stages, especially within nonprofit scholarship. In the following section of this introduction, we will highlight

extant research on diversity in the field of nonprofit studies, revealing how it assesses 'diversity attributes' in terms of predefined categories, how it is permeated in a managerial sphere as well as its lack of consideration to the specificity of the nonprofit context.

## Diversity in nonprofit organizations

The nonprofit sector can primarily be identified as mission-driven by pursuit of social or societal value, without attaining profit and reinvesting any profits into their operation or mission (Oosterlynck et al., 2019). It exists of a complex range of different organizations that all interact with various actors such as beneficiaries, group members, volunteers, staff, boards and private or public funders (Keevers et al., 2012; Anheier et al., 2019). Different diversity categories have been studied among all these actors in several kinds of nonprofit organizations[3] and from various theoretical perspectives. However, overall, two research strands can be recognized and delineated. First, research on diversity in nonprofit organizations is notably overrepresented in countries with a liberal civil society regime (such as the US, UK, or Australia) (Kornau et al., 2021). Contrary to Belgium, nonprofit organizations in these countries have a more 'loose' relationship with the government and are, therefore, more likely to operate independently and compete with one another for influence (see further) (Hustinx et al., 2014; Harlow et al., 2013).

It is not surprising, therefore, that a majority of nonprofit diversity scholarship particularly addresses the various circumstances that allow for diversity to lead to the best possible organizational outcomes. Focusing on leaders and board member composition, Bernstein and Fredette (2023) and other prominent scholars in nonprofit research, for example, focus on diversity categories such as race/ethnicity and gender and how these can contribute to nonprofits' organizational performance (see e.g., Bernstein and Fredette, 2023; Azmat and Rentschler, 2017; Siciliano, 1996; Cody et al., 2022; Harris, 2014). Similarly, other scholars address 'negative work-related outcomes' such as stigmatization, discrimination, and stereotyping in order to overcome and, as such, produce benefits for stakeholders, personal development of organizational members, and improved organizational performance (see e.g.,

[3] Many studies in nonprofit scholarship refer to a wide range of nonprofit organizations and actions, both formal and informal, captured in (but not limited to) terms like civil society (organizations), nongovernmental organizations, social movements, philanthropy, and voluntary action. For clarity, I will only and consistently use 'nonprofit organizations'.

Bernstein et al., 2020; Bernstein and Bilimoria, 2013; Pitts and Jarry, 2009; Ding and Riccucci, 2022; Brimhall, 2019).

Research in Belgian nonprofits, on the other hand, reveals that nonprofit organizations are, due to their institutional features, less prone to issues of inequality altogether. Van Dooren and Jilke (2022) for example conducted a study in long-term care facilities for older people in Belgium and concluded that no evidence of discrimination in access to services could be found, attributing this to the absence of a profit motive, combined with a stronger sense of social mission. Similarly, Brolis and colleagues (2018) find that social economies in Belgium are more likely to manage target group diversity from a multicultural perspective than from a business perspective because they defend values of equality and justice, leading to less prejudice and discrimination[4]. Similar findings are also found outside Belgium and in other sectors such as philanthropical organizations (Capek and Mead, 2007) and associations (Mason, 2020).

Taken together, it can be concluded that a significant share of nonprofit diversity scholarship is preoccupied with empirically assessing the effect of diversity on organizational effectiveness and thus predominantly perceives diversity instrumentally and strategically, in terms of potential performance outcomes or as a 'dividend' (Jurcevic and Fyall, 2020; Bernstein et al., 2015). Consequently, these studies also more often focus on 'powerful' actors such as board members, leaders that can influence organizational outcomes or target group members and hence neglect the role of diversity in workplace settings.

Related to this, is the second stream in nonprofit diversity research, which lies in a more critical assessment of nonprofits. There has been a scant but growing amount of research critiquing nonprofits preoccupation with business-like practices, pointing out issues of inequality and inequity in the sector. Drawing on a critical perspective, Heckler (2019) for example argues that the US nonprofit sector is plagued with whiteness and masculinity, which is further reinforced through business-like norms (see also Heckler, 2022; Nickels and Leach, 2021). Similarly, Fulton et al. (2019) shed light on organizational inequality and explore how leaders of colour within predominantly white nonprofit organizations can play a pivotal role in tackling racial inequality by taking in a critical standpoint and sufficient authority. Another example is provided by Knoppers et al. (2015), who make the assumption that nonprofits, like for-profits, emphasize a 'business case' of managing diversity because they are likely to reflect

[4] While this can be attributed to Belgium's neo-corporatist tradition where business practices are less far reaching than in countries with a liberal tradition (Pauly et al., 2021), it does not explain the existing ethnic gap in nonprofit organizations (see research methodology).

the public they try to serve, leading to a reinforcement of institutionalized inequalities and homogeneity. Overall, these studies generally exemplify many of the same core tenets of critical scholarship in organization and management studies. Accordingly, they conclude that the nonprofit sector proves much the same as the private sector in that these organizations perpetuate inequality through racial/ethnic barriers or 'glass ceilings' and their focus on performance.

The prominence of studies addressing issues of diversity in terms of social stratification, power, and inequality in nonprofit organizations is scarce but has been steadily increasing, reflecting a growing recognition of its relevance in contemporary discourse (for an extensive overview see Coule et al., 2020). Nonetheless, these studies face the same obstacle as research in management and organization studies in that they fail to examine how diversity relates to its 'nonprofitness'. While they take place in nonprofit organizations, none of the studies examines how the specific characteristics of the nonprofit sector give meaning to the dynamics of 'diversity'[5]. Most studies depart from normative assumptions about nonprofit organizations' 'natural' inclination towards a business or social justice perspective, leading to ambiguous results. Workplace diversity, therefore, remains an empty and malleable concept that can take different forms and definitions and carries a specific meaning depending on its performative use.

As accurately pointed out by Ahonen et al. (2014); when context is rendered insignificant or is at the least not spelled out or problematized, there is indeed an assumption that diversity merely exists of 'manageable' attributes that can be analyzed separately (Ahonen et al., 2014; Tatli and Özbilgin, 2012). So, regardless of whether nonprofits are susceptible to the economic management of diversity, the aforementioned studies all have in common that they understand and conceptualize diversity in terms of salient and fixed categories that are manageable. Consequently, there is still little to no knowledge as to what drives organizations in the nonprofit sector to pursue or establish diversity and how this relates to their task of pursuing a social mission to create social change. To answer this requires us to first prioritize the question of how the nonprofit context plays into the ways differences are constructed and, thus, to examine the *emergent* categories of difference in the workplace which are specific to a

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[5] Only recently, Kornau et al. (2022) have provided evidence that the way nonprofits organize their workforces can be in conflicting relationship with their organizational mission. Drawing upon a Foucauldian approach to power and discourse in Turkey, the authors find that program managers of a civil society organization are more attentive to the highly contested discrimination of certain ethnic groups and social change than managers in for-profits who are quicker to frame doing so as 'politically dangerous' (Kornau et al., 2021; Kornau et al., 2022). However, the scholars predominantly point out the relevance of the Turkish national context and to a lesser extent the organizational context.

particular time and place. In doing so, we move 'beyond the ambiguous "contextualization of research findings" to a more considered and structured understanding of the role of context' (McLaren and Durepos, 2021: 77).

## Flanders' civil society and nonprofit organizations

Through its comprehensive focus on nonprofit organizations in Flanders, Belgium's northern region, this dissertation addresses the way 'diversity' categories are formed and how diversity and context are related to each other. This is in line with McLaren and Durepos's (2021: 80-81) call to 'practice context' in organization studies:

> When a phenomenon under study is contextualized, we need to understand that the phenomenon is an inextricable component of the context in which it exists or occurs. Context is not passive, and it is not merely the background setting to the study.

I define nonprofit organizations as organizations that take up a specific role in the wider field of civil society. While I will not entirely elaborate on the ambiguity surrounding the meaning of civil society[6] in this dissertation, I do want to highlight some of its characteristics in the Flemish context that are important for understanding diversity and nonprofit organizations. These characteristics are especially important because they allow us to understand how context and diversity relate to each other and why this particular context makes it meaningful to unravel diversity in the workplace.

While civil society and thus nonprofit organizations are theoretically perceived as standing outside of the realm of the state, there is in practice a state's capacity to regulate civil society (Anheier, 2023). This is especially the case on the European continent, where countries like Belgium are characterized by a history in which there exists an intertwined and institutionalized exchange between government and civil society. This means that nonprofit organizations not only act as service providers but also as active agents in shaping the policies that regulate these services. This close relationship between the state and civil society is a distinctive criteria for a neo-corporatist regime, which Belgium is a typical example of (Hustinx et al., 2014; Pauly et al., 2021; Baines et al., 2014). This foundation upon which Flanders' civil

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[6] While there are many different definitions of civil society, and there is little agreement on its precise meaning, most prominent scholars in nonprofit and civil society studies agree that civil society is the sum of institutions, organizations, and individuals located between the family, the state, and the market. The nonprofit sector, then, provides the organizational infrastructure of civil society along with voluntary associations and social movements (Anheier, 2006: 9)

society is built leads to some important key characteristics that affect how nonprofit organizations may deal with diversity.

Firstly, because of its historically intersected relationship with the state, nonprofit organizations attribute a major source of their funding to the government. Local governments in particular are especially tight knit with voluntary associations on advocacy, culture or recreation. The introduction of business practices to generate income is therefore far less outspoken in Flemish nonprofit organizations (Suykens et al., 2020), compared to more liberal welfare regimes such as in the Anglo-Saxon region who rely mainly on donations, fees and other private earned income (see e.g., Jurcevic and Fyall, 2020; Sanders and McClellan, 2014; Archambault, 2009). However, the widespread presence of competitive and 'market' like governance permeating predominantly US and UK nonprofit organizations, had led to a preponderance of research focusing on business-like practices in this context, and how these practices shape and transform organizations. While it is a matter of thorough debate whether nonprofit organizations should and can use business-like perspectives, considerable research attention has nevertheless been given to nonprofit social *and* economic performance focusing on profitable activities (Doherty et al., 2014), board representation, (Doherty et al., 2014) and stakeholder and funder relationships (LeRoux, 2009a; Willems et al., 2016), consequently further promoting the adoption of business-like practices (see also Dees and Anderson, 2003; Maier et al., 2016; Buse et al., 2016; Dick and Coule, 2020; Jurcevic and Fyall, 2020; Sanders and McClellan, 2014).

That is not to say, however, that neo-corporatist nonprofit regimes are devoid of any business-like influences (see e.g., Bode, 2011). These organizations also operate in a structural reality of neoliberalism as a powerful discursive, social, economic and political project that is increasingly proposing a view of the nonprofit sector as being embedded in the market (Feldman et al., 2017; Wacquant, 2012). Research has shown that policy discourses are slowly but surely stressing the importance of managerial and entrepreneurial strategies (Carré et al., 2021), leading to nonprofits' increased preoccupation with service delivery over advocacy, less attention to community building (Eikenberry and Kluver, 2004) and detrimental effects to workers' identities and satisfaction (Baines et al., 2014). However, the much-discussed rise of business practices and the overrepresentation of research in a liberal and competitive context (in which especially nonprofit organizations in the US and UK operate) has left an important imprint on how diversity in nonprofit organizations is conceptualized and studied – that is, devoid from addressing and problematizing its particular context.

Secondly, because of their high collaboration with the government in providing social services and involvement in shaping public policy, nonprofit organizations in a neo-corporatist civil society such as Flanders are typically characterized by a high level of paid employment (Pauly et al., 2021; Heitzmann and Simsa, 2004; Mansfeldová et al., 2004; Baines et al., 2014). In fact, not only does Belgium have one of the largest nonprofit sectors globally, but the sector also contributes to about 12% of the country's total workforce, with about 60% active in the Flemish region, and is still characterized by employment growth (Pauly et al., 2021; Rigo et al., 2018; Szekér and Van Gyes, 2017). While many of these nonprofit organizations still to a large extent rely on volunteers (Verhaeghe, 2019), they offer employment to a broad spectrum of occupations such as social(cultural) workers, community workers, youth workers, job counsellors, staff members, leaders, and many more (Szekér and Van Gyes, 2017). Debates regarding 'diverse' representation amongst paid workforce are furthermore permeating the nonprofit sphere, especially because the Flemish society is increasingly characterized by differences in terms of migration history, cultural and religious beliefs, and social class background, among other things. The face, interests, and values of the citizens that nonprofit organizations are supposed to present have indeed changed the idea of citizenship and the shared sense of belonging, creating challenges for nonprofit organizations to rethink their representational role (Oosterlynck et al., 2017). The following section delves more into the profound influence of ethnicity and religion in the Flemish labour market. The sociohistorical and political dynamics in Flanders have conferred such significance to these dimensions that they have emerged as important differentiating factors within the labor market. The interplay of these forces has more specifically resulted in a notable convergence of todays' diversity discourse, wherein ethnicity and religion assume a nearly synonymous and highly consequential definition within the labor market context.

## Ethnic occupational stratification

Research has shown that discourses of 'diversity' are socially constructed and value-based depending on for example the prevailing ideological climate (Cheong et al., 2007) and that organizations usually reproduce the discourses that hold sway in the broader society (Janssens and Steyaert, 2003). Therefore, to unveil the socially constructed nature of 'diversity' in nonprofit organization, we need to first look, among others, at the occupational stratification of the Belgian labour market. Among European countries, Belgium stands out in terms of the strong ethnic gap in employment and income distribution. This can be led back to the post-

World War II period and subsequent years, where Belgium recruited migrant workers from countries such as Italy, Spain, Greece, Turkey, and Morocco to meet labour demands in low-status jobs (e.g., heavy metal and mining industries) (Phalet and Swyngedouw, 2003). Following however, the economic recession and the oil crisis in the 70s, the Belgian government imposed a halt to legal labour immigration from non-European countries (for members of the European Economic Community applied the right to freedom of movement). By the 80s, the socioeconomic restructuring towards a post-industrial economy, therefore, not only disproportionately affected the aforementioned low-skilled immigrant populations, leading further to ethnic stratification on the labour market but also placed especially Turks and Moroccans as the ultimate 'others' in public and political debates (Beyers, 2008). These debates now revolved around fundamental cultural differences, and, as such, Belgians associated the word 'foreigner' far less with Italians for example than with Turks and Moroccans (Beyers, 2008; Jacobs and Rea, 2007). The continuing disadvantaged educational position[7] for children of these immigrant groups as well as the considerable societal stigmatization of the 'allochtoon' or 'foreigner' has heightened with a widespread anti-Islam sentiment following the 9/11 attacks. The Flemish extreme right-wing party has consistently been discussing especially Moroccan men as threats to public safety and the moral and social order of a supposedly homogenous majority (De Cleen et al., 2017; Schuermans and De Maesschalck, 2010).

The profound consciousness of positionalities, identities, and differences has also more recently been fueled by right-wing conservatism (and other parties) in Flanders and has led to contentious debates that predominantly describe ethnicity, culture, language, and religion as the main categories through which 'diversity' is defined (De Cleen et al., 2017; Van Ruyskensvelde and Berghmans, 2020). As such, up until now, recent migrants as well as 'foreigners' born in Belgium face marginalization and stigmatization through common religious hate speech (Howard, 2017) and framing as 'unadjusted', and 'taking unfair advantage of the welfare state' (Kostet, 2022: 9-10; Teney et al., 2013). This is furthermore strengthened by a legal ban on religious expression in several institutions, affecting predominantly Muslim women's religious freedom and entrance into the labour market (Brems, 2021; Brems et al., 2018).

[7] While many institutions somewhat rightfully attribute the labour market stratification to Flanders' ethnically stratified educational system (see e.g., Baysu et al., 2018), research nonetheless shows that significant ethnic inequalities persist after controlling for educational attainment and socioeconomic background (Heath and Brinbaum, 2007; Maes et al., 2019)

The differentiation in terms of ethnic and religious belonging can arguably shed some light on the occupational stratification in especially Belgians' Flemish society. Not only is there a significant ethnic gap but non-European populations in Flanders are more likely to end up in unemployment than anywhere else in Europe (Commissie Diversiteit, 2019: 10-13). Of course, ethnicity as an identity marker intersects with other categories of exclusion such as gender, social class or disability and ethnic inequalities undoubtedly vary from context to context. Nonetheless, research has shown that organizational members predominantly construct a categorical and essentialist discourse of the ethnic (and religious) other (see e.g., Janssens and Zanoni, 2014; Knoppers et al., 2015), even when they define 'diversity' in terms of inclusivity toward *all* minorities. As such, it must be recognized as an important signifier of inequality in the Flemish society both in a discursive and material sense.

As for nonprofit organizations, representational data[8] indeed reveals a significant ethnic gap to the disadvantage of ethnic minorities. In fact, there is an ever-decreasing share of people with a non-European migration background the more decision-making power a position holds. Even so, however, a majority of these organizations (56%) do not consider ethnic diversity important in the context of paid workforce, rather they perceive it to be relevant in terms of 'being open to differences in cultural and religious experience' (Laoukili et al., 2019). One possible explanation for this lies in the fact that nonprofits in especially Flanders have been encapsulated within traditional pillars of Catholicism, socialism and liberalism. Belgium's' social and political life has been characterized by a long history of strong ideological competition that emphasizes social and cultural sameness around these pillars (Archambault, 2009). As such, each pillar provides for its members in all aspects of their life, including civil society (Van Haute, 2015). Of course, by now, many nonprofits have evolved outside of the pillarized structures and have organized around Flemish social issues that were being ignored by the traditional pillarized nonprofits such as women's rights. Many of these organizations have become institutionalized and have a considerable impact on the political and social agenda (Pauly et al., 2021), however still confined within cultural boundaries (Poldervaart, 2005). Moreover, while this is to a much lesser extend reflected in their organizational practices than it was last century, many nonprofit organizations are still typically run under the auspices of Catholic, socialist or liberal affiliations, who still have strong connections with the government

[8] This data is drawn from a large-scale survey conducted with Flemish nonprofits (N=498) which I will elaborate on in the dissertations' research methodology.

(Fraussen and Wouters, 2015) and where there exist long-standing conventions, civic and cultural values that may hamper any form of cultural plurality (Churcher et al., 2022).

In sum, there is a need to better understand how nonprofit organizations regard diversity and (co-)construct differences, particularly in relation to their role as service providers addressing issues of community building, (in)equality, and solidarity in a neo-corporatist welfare state.

## Research questions and overview

This dissertation answers recent calls for research on the role of diversity in nonprofit organizations  as well as more context-specific diversity studies (Kornau et al., 2022). It more specifically aims to contribute to the aforementioned literature by taking into consideration how various and complex organizational processes and characteristics in nonprofit organizations are intertwined with how differences are constituted. It therefore rests on the assumption that diversity is not merely something that is managed by an organization, but that it is constituted through particular circumstances and processes. I bring this to light in four empirical studies that are focused on answering three research questions. The first one being:

> How is diversity conceptualized and implemented in Flemish nonprofit organizations?

This overarching question is answered in the first three chapters of this dissertation. More specifically, in chapter one we unravel the discourses nonprofit leaders draw upon to describe their commitment to diversity in the workplace. As diversity is often discussed from a managerial point of view and, particularly in nonprofits, with little attention to workplace diversity, this empirical study explores how leaders in twenty-five different types of nonprofits approach workplace diversity, discursively and in their organizational practices. The analysis in this chapter is centered around Maier and Meyer's (2011) typology on nonprofit governance and more specifically aims to understand how workplace diversity is perceived in organizations with a domestic, professionalist, grassroots, and civic discourse. We subsequently outline the main diversity perspectives underlying these governance discourses. Our study reveals that nonprofit leaders perceive 'diversity' predominantly in terms of ethnic differences and the way they approach workplace diversity is shaped by their overall governance.

In chapters two and three we delve deeper into two nonprofit welfare organizations and look at how differences are ascribed to employees in a certain social setting (meso-level analysis), but also at the way individuals' identities are perceived and constructed by themselves

and others (micro-level analysis). In chapter two, our goal is to understand how and why these organizations incorporate and accommodate to diversity as a societal phenomenon in their environments. Both organizations operate in a metropolitan context characterized by social and ethnic inequality. Drawing on 42 in-depth interviews with leaders and staff members of these welfare organizations, the study brings into sight how social differences in terms of ethnicity or gender 'enter' nonprofit organizations through a professional and community institutional logic and what this implicates in terms of how organizations operate. In chapter three, then, we address how these cases with their organizational frame, their forms of knowledge, and discursive practices shape individual differences and people's identities in a unique way. Drawing on a narrative analysis of discourses of different types of employees, including those in leading functions we hence carefully examine how differences are established within the organizational setting of welfare organizations and understand the individual experiences of employees as subjects who regulate their identities herein.

The second research question I propose, addresses how organizational processes, characteristics and actor identities are interconnected with 'diversity' in a nonprofit context:

How are organizational structures and employees' identities interconnected with established differences in terms of diversity?

More specifically, in chapter two we offer an extensive discussion of how diversity affects organizational structure and actor identities when it is introduced from a professional and community logic. Drawing on the institutional logics approach, it therefore examines both how *and* why nonprofits incorporate diversity into their organizational structures and how this informs employees' identities. As for the empirical study outlined in chapter three where I look deeper into employees' identity work, I aim to resolve the question as to how the established diversity affects the multiple forms of identification people draw on in changing situations and contexts. This study draws on a poststructuralist approach in order to understand the individual experiences of employees as subjects who regulate their identities in these workplace environments. Overall, these studies aim to offer a clear explanatory framework for better understanding workplace diversity in nonprofit organizations.

Finally, this dissertation also touches upon the following question:

How can our understanding and assumptions about diversity affect knowledge production?

This question is addressed in chapter four where I offer a reflexive account and contribute to the literature by capturing the impact of the researchers' ethnic minority identity on qualitative research, particularly in the context of diversity research. Drawing on interview fragments with ethnic majority employers and employees, it demonstrates the commonality of discursive processes of essentializing and how these can challenge the researcher-researched relationship and lead to shifting power dynamics. In using reflexivity, this chapter specifically addresses the socially constructed nature of knowledge production and as such, the fluid nature of fieldwork as well as the versatility of 'diversity' as a social phenomenon.

In sum, this dissertation presents a contribution to understanding how diversity relates to context, i.e., the nonprofit sector. The studies take into account the intricate interplay between organizational processes and characteristics in shaping how differences are constituted. By investigating diversity from multiple angles and levels of analysis, the combination of empirical studies in the different chapters aim to offer a comprehensive understanding of this complex phenomenon. The research questions addressed in each chapter shed light on various aspects of diversity in nonprofit organizations, including (i) conceptualizations and operationalizations, (ii) the incorporation and accommodation of diversity in organizational environments, (iii) the construction of individual identities within the organizational context, and (iv) the potential implications and challenges of conducting diversity research. This comprehensive approach fills gaps in the current literature by examining the unique characteristics and contexts of nonprofit organizations while going beyond simplistic management or social justice perspectives and addressing the role of power dynamics and inequalities. By doing so, this dissertation not only aims to contributes to the advancement of theoretical knowledge but also to offer practical insights that may guide nonprofit organizations toward more equitable practices.

## Research methodology

This dissertation aims to answer emergent calls for more attention to the institutional and organizational context when studying diversity. It more specifically seeks out to investigate the meaning of workplace diversity through the perspectives and experiences of leaders and employees in nonprofit organizations. I have therefore employed qualitative research methods as a way to develop a critical and nuanced understanding of how 'diversity' is conceptualized and operationalized in the workplace of nonprofit organizations. This dissertation, therefore, is rooted in a critical realist stance in that it aims to move beyond description to explanation and emphasizes that the reality we observe is context dependent. According to Miles and Huberman (1994: 44), realism calls '[…] for the evidence to show that each entity or event is an instance of that explanation. So, we need not only an explanatory structure but also a grasp of the particular configuration at hand'. The use of critical realism in organization studies, in particular, proves to be fruitful as it enables us to delineate the phenomenon of workplace diversity while also addressing how this is intertwined with nonprofit organizing. It hence situates workplace diversity as embedded in and evolving with the organizational context over time, allowing us to better grasp the meaning of the concept (cf. chapter one). Moreover, critical realism provides a meta-theoretical framing between structures and actors because it delineates how nonprofit characteristics may affect workplace diversity as well as how agency is created, and which structures are produced on account of this agency (cf. chapter two and three). Finally, critical realism also allows elaborating on the role of the researcher and the epistemological challenges inherent in conducting diversity research, which can guide how a study can be done (cf. chapter four) (Frederiksen and Kringelum, 2021).

In remaining of this section, we delve deeper in the methodology adopted in the subsequent chapters. The first subsection further situates the forthcoming chapters and discusses some key characteristics of Flanders' civil society and, more specifically, the representation of ethnic minorities therein. After that, I will respectively describe the procedures undertaken for the case selection, data collection and data analysis.

### Research context

In our analysis we investigate nonprofit organizations based in the region of Flanders, the Dutch-speaking community and northern region of Belgium. This dissertation departs from an approach that identifies categories of diversity as emergent and situated. The Flemish context, as mentioned previously, lends itself to particularly explore the role of ethnicity as an identity

marker. Indeed, as will become apparent in subsequent chapters, ethnic identity dimensions turned out to be an important source of identification by organizational actors[9] and, consequently, of social stratification. The importance of diversity in terms of ethnic identity is also reflected in its incorporation in the Flemish Civil Society & Innovations (2019) survey. This large-scale survey provides valuable information on just over 500 nonprofit organizations; their (sub)sector, size, members, income, information on how organizations deal with marketization, their relationship with government, as well as ethnic diversity[10] of members, staff and volunteers (Civil Society & Innovations, 2019). In this section, I highlight some of the main points of the research project and how it has informed subsequent empirical research.

In Flanders, 11,3% of citizens are categorized as 'non-European'. Table 1 shows the relative representation of non-European[11] ethnic minorities in Flemish nonprofit organizations. These numbers reveal that more than half of nonprofit organizations have no to little representation of ethnic minorities in all segments of their organizations. Moreover, the share of ethnic minorities decreases the more decision-making power the position holds in the organization. Hence, ethnic minorities are significantly more likely to be an organizations' primary clientele then they are to be staff members or in a position of leadership (Laoukili et al., 2019).

Table 1 Representation of non-European ethnic minorities according to organizational segment

| | **Underrepresentation** | **Proportional representation** | **Overrepresentation** | **N** |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Reached target group** | 40% | 28,10% | 31% | 359 |
| **Members** | 62,9% | 19,80% | 17,30% | 209 |
| **Volunteers** | 78% | 12,70% | 9,4% | 298 |
| **Paid staff** | 70,50% | 17,40% | 12,10% | 322 |
| **Governance bodies[12]** | 92,20% | 4,70% | 3,20% | 383 |

[9] Other identity markers such as gender or sexual orientation also proved to be relevant (see chapter 3), however more often so in relation to ethnic/religious categorizations.
[10] An ethnic minority is defined as a person with non-Belgian nationality or a person who at least one of the parents has or had non-Belgian nationality (Laoukili et al., 2019).
[11] The survey defines non-European ethnic minorities as people who either have a non-European ethnic background and/or one of their (grand)parents.
[12] The survey defines 'governance bodies' as the highest governing body in the organization.

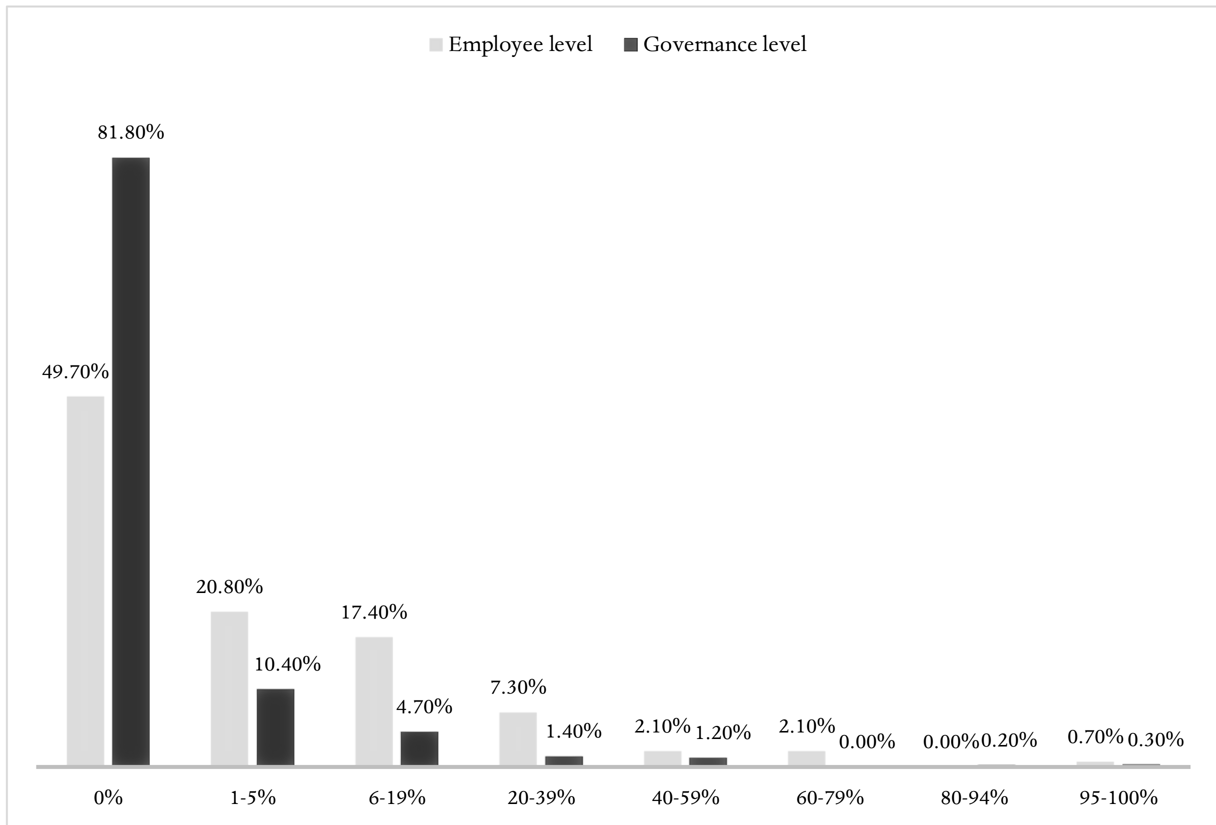

Figure 1 Share of paid staff with a non-European migration background at employee and governance level

In Figure 1, the representation of paid employees and governance staff members is shown, giving a visual illustration of the significant underrepresentation non-European ethnic minorities in these segments of the nonprofit sector. It is furthermore worth noting that only a small minority of these organizations highlight the importance of diversifying all levels of the organization, including management and the board of directors.

Flanders' population is characterized by growing differences in terms of migration history, cultural and religious beliefs, and social class background. These socio-demographic shifts are moreover accompanied with an emergent societal repoliticization of diversity issues: citizens are actively recognizing and addressing the political dimensions and implications of diversity in society, emphasizing the importance of acknowledging and engaging with the power dynamics, systemic inequalities, and social justice issues associated with feminism, racial and sexual diversity (see e.g., Plotnikof et al., 2022; Van Ruyskensvelde and Berghmans, 2020). Diversity, consequently, touches on the question as to how societies and organizations perceive citizenship and the shared sense of belonging. For nonprofit organizations, who's primary purpose is to serve the needs and interests of citizens or address societal challenges,

diversity poses a challenge in terms of rethinking their representational role and incorporating diversity into their organizational practices (Oosterlynck et al., 2017; Laoukili et al., 2019).

Flemish nonprofit organizations, however, unmistakably deal with a skewed representation in terms of ethnic differences. While some organizations perceive this as an issue that needs to be dealt internally by the organization, a majority of nonprofits attribute the challenges related to diversity beyond their own organization. Rather, they ascribe the existing underrepresentation to an incompatibility of values and norms regarding gender, sexuality, religion, and cultural differences in upbringing and family – which consequently may cause conflicts in the workplace. Within this notion of Flemish 'values and norms', many nonprofit organizations also refer to the importance of employees mastering the Dutch language. Next to other cultural differences, limited knowledge of the Dutch language is often seen as a challenge for organizations in their daily operations. While speaking Dutch is undoubtedly necessary for nonprofit employees to engage with the communities their serving, the widespread concern amongst respondents with regard to cultural differences and language (see also chapter one) also reflects the prevalent societal and political debates in Flanders regarding these topics[13]. Along the same lines as this broader societal and political climate, nonprofit organizations, perceive employment of ethnic minorities in their organizations from an assimilationist perspective arguing that access to their organizations is contingent upon ethnic minorities' efforts to learn and adopt the Dutch language and Flemish 'values and norms'. Ethnic minority actors who hold a position in the nonprofit sector similarly experience a paternalistic and assimilationist view of their ethnic and religious identity (Swerts et al., 2017).

Some nonprofits, on other hand, perceive ethnic diversity from a pragmatist and instrumentalist point of view, stating that it brings a significant added value in reaching and engaging a diverse target audience. Finally, a small minority of nonprofits believe that to 'diversify' the workplace, they need to critically assess their organization and distribute power across all levels as well as address issues of racism, polarization, and discrimination – hence implementing the aforementioned critical perspective on workplace diversity.

In conclusion, when it comes to membership and participation in Flemish nonprofit society organizations, research shows clear differences across ethnic lines, with ethnic minorities being significantly underrepresented in the workplace and, on the pretext of assimilation, depreciated

[13] In light of the regions' growing diversity, Flemish independentist parties such as N-VA (New-Flemish Alliance) and Vlaams Belang (Flemish Interest), who are currently Flanders two biggest political parties representing the region, for example, increasingly problematize the issue of 'multiculturalism' and 'multilingualism' and endorse civic nationalism centered around the Dutch language and anti-immigration (Kanobana, 2022).

because of their 'poor' cultural and lingual skills (Laoukili et al., 2019). While this brief situating of the research context is only centered around ethnic identity markers and therefore does not entirely capture workplace diversity in Flemish nonprofit organizations, it does shed light on significant trends in representation as well as the dominant discourses that are imbued in this context. Before moving forward and meticulously assessing workplace diversity in this sector (see chapter one) and more specifically in welfare organizations (see chapter two and three), I will first give an overview of the qualitative research process that lies at the foundation of this work.

## Case selection

For the purpose of this dissertation, I started by drawing a sample from the Civil Society and Innovations database that comprised of data on a little over 500 organizations. I made use of purposive sampling, which is a common sampling approach in qualitative research that aims to generate an in-depth understanding of the phenomenon under study (Patton, 2014). In purposive sampling, the selection of participants is based on their relevance to the research aims and to explore the diversity of their perspectives on an issue, rather than identifying common patterns. Indeed, the objective of this study does not seek to make inferences about the features of the entire population of nonprofit organizations. Instead, it aims to comprehend how employees and their leaders perceive and make sense of workplace diversity in relation to the nonprofit context. As for the purposive sampling strategy, a group characteristic sampling was applied which selects cases that allow the researcher to create specific information that reveals patterns of nonprofits' workplace diversity. This was done by selecting nonprofits who perceive diversity as a challenge (see Table 2). In interview round one and two, then, I respectively adopted *heterogeneous purposive sampling*, which involves selecting organizations across a broad spectrum relating to the topic of study (Etikan et al., 2016) and *reputational or critical sampling*, which involves identifying organizations with relatively high workplace diversity and as such allows deep insight into the phenomenon under study.

### *Round 1*

The CSI Flanders database gives insight to a variety of nonprofit organizations of varying sizes, ranging from small organizations with four employees to more high-capacity nonprofits with more than 100 employees. It also provides information on organizations' (sub)sector, their demographic composition in terms of ethnicity as well as their perceptions of ethnic diversity

in different segments of their organizations (see appendix). For the purpose of this dissertation and to narrow our cases down, I chose to include organizations that acknowledge ethnic diversity as a challenge and included organizations with more and less diversity (ranging between 0 and 94% minority ethnic employees)[14]. Finally, I included a range of organizations, with several social missions and roles in terms of service delivery, civic engagement and advocacy, with leaders whose types of contact with their personnel varies, and with different organizational structures. According to Flyvbjerg (2006), our cases can also be regarded as a very heterogeneous selection of 'critical cases' as they are selected strategically in relation to the general topic of this study. Furthermore, I also included two organizations who were mentioned by case-selected organizations as important actors when it comes to workplace diversity. Consequently, the participants were selected using both data-driven criteria and snowball sampling.

Drawing on the survey data furthermore allowed me to break up the organizations according to their sector and subsector. In Table 2 an overview is given of the share of welfare and socio-cultural organizations[15] who consider ethnic diversity a challenge.

Table 2 Nonprofit organizations considering ethnic diversity as a challenge according to sector

| | **Consider diversity a challenge** | **Do not consider diversity a challenge** | **N** |
|---|---|---|---|
| **Welfare sector** | 60,42% | 39,58% | 192 |
| **Socio-cultural sector** | 73,21% | 26,79%% | 265 |

We initially contacted 50 organizations retrieved from the CSI Flanders database around May until June 2020 through mail (see appendix for letter of invitation). The leaders were asked to participate in research on diversity in the nonprofit sector and if they would more particularly be willing to go in conversation with me regarding workplace diversity and share any ideas, practices, strategies and/or project they have around this topic. I furthermore assured them that the conversations, which would take around an hour of their time, would be anonymous. In total, 23 organizations from the CSI dataset were included in this research. Two other organizations were contacted through snowball sampling, as they were frequently mentioned

[14] It is important to note that none of the selected organizations are categorized as self-organizations established by ethnic minorities.

[15] In the initial survey, 'social economy' was also included. However, we focused on welfare and sociocultural organizations, which make up the largest part of the CSI Flanders database, accounting for approximately 90% of the data.

by a majority of organizations as ‘an example’ when it comes to diversity. We thus ended up analyzing empirical data on 25 welfare and sociocultural organizations in the Belgian region of Flanders (see Table 3). A majority of the participating organizations can be classified in the welfare sector (sixteen organizations), while nine are classified as socio-cultural organizations. All respondents but two (respondent eleven and thirteen) belong to the majority ethnic population in Flanders and all occupy a leading position as director or coordinator of a welfare or sociocultural organization. The remaining, nonparticipating organizations either did not respond or declined due to a lack of time and having to adjust to the newly imposed COVID-19 regulations in their organizations during this period.

Table 3 Research participants, characteristics of organizations and workforce composition

| Respondents | Position | Gender | Sector | Subsector | Province | Target group diversity | Workforce diversity | Board diversity | Employees (N) |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Respondent 1** | Coordinator | M | SCS | Youth/Social Service | Brussel | 20-39% | 1-5% | 1-5% | 27 |
| **Respondent 2** | Coordinator | F | WS | Youth/Social Service | Limburg | 20-39% | 6-19% | 0% | 120 |
| **Respondent 3** | Managing director | F | SCS | Youth/Health Insurance | Brussel | 6-19% | 1-5% | 0% | 66 |
| **Respondent 4** | Managing director | F | SCS | Youth Service/Education | Antwerp | 20-39% | 1-5% | 0% | 6 |
| **Respondent 5** | Managing director | F | WS | Social Development/Assistance | Brussel | 40-59% | 1-5% | 0% | 4 |
| **Respondent 6** | Managing director | M | SCS | Self-help | Flemish Brabant | 1-5% | 6-19% | 0% | 7 |
| **Respondent 7** | Managing director | M | SCS | Culture/Recreation | Flemish Brabant | 1-5% | 1-5% | 1-5% | 23 |
| **Respondent 8** | Managing director | M | WS | Youth/Social Service | Antwerp | | | | |
| **Respondent 9** | Managing director | F | SCS | Culture & Recreation/Advocacy | Limburg | 6-19% | 6-19% | 20-39% | 19 |
| **Respondent 10** | Managing director | M | SCS | Culture | Antwerp | 20-39% | 0% | 20-39% | 7 |
| **Respondent 11** | Managing director | F | WS | Crisis Intervention | West Flanders | 40-59% | 6-19% | 0% | 12 |
| **Respondent 12** | Managing director | F | WS | Advocacy/Civil Rights | Antwerp | 60-79% | 40-59% | 1-5% | 92 |
| **Respondent 13** | Managing director | M | WS | Advocacy/Civil Rights | Brussel | N/A | N/A | N/A | N/A |
| **Respondent 14** | Managing director | M | WS | Youth/Social Service | Antwerp | N/A | N/A | N/A | N/A |
| **Respondent 15** | Managing director and HR director | F | WS | Youth/Social Service | Antwerp | N/A | N/A | N/A | N/A |
| **Respondent 16** | Managing director | M | WS | Development/ Job training programs | Antwerp | N/A | N/A | N/A | N/A |
| **Respondent 17** | Coordinator | F | WS | Family counselling | Antwerp | N/A | 40-59% | N/A | 93 |

| | | | | | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Respondent 18** | Managing director | F | SCS | Culture/Recreation | Antwerp | N/A | N/A | N/A | N/A |
| **Respondent 19** | Managing director and coordinator | F | WS | Youth/Social Service | Flemish Brabant | N/A | N/A | N/A | N/A |
| **Respondent 20** | Managing director | M | WS | Advocacy/Civil Rights | Brussel | N/A | N/A | N/A | N/A |
| **Respondent 21** | Managing director | F | WS | Social Development/Assistance | West Flanders | N/A | N/A | N/A | N/A |
| **Respondent 22** | Managing director | M | WS | Non-governmental organization | Brussel | N/A | N/A | N/A | 30 |
| **Respondent 23** | Coordinator | M | SCS | Umbrella organization | Brussel | N/A | N/A | N/A | N/A |
| **Respondent 24** | Coordinator | F | WS | Social Development/Assistance | Antwerp | N/A | N/A | N/A | N/A |
| **Respondent 25** | Managing director | M | WS | Youth/Social Service | East Flanders | N/A | N/A | N/A | N/A |

*Round 2*

The second round of my case selection was subsequently informed by data derived from the first round. Two organizations particularly stood out in the first interview round as 'reputational' cases (Patton, 2014) as they were often mentioned by respondents as good examples of organizations who have obtained a wide diversity of employees and whom they would contact if they needed 'diversity related' information. This predominantly referred to ethnic diversity and indeed, the interviewed directors of these organizations shared extensive and elaborate views, practices and challenges within their organizations on this topic. The leader of organization B for example shared the following about their recruitment policy:

> "Our former leader started working around diversity-related topics without consulting anyone except the board of directors. This was more than twenty years ago and by now we have done many things with trial and error […] I think the most import lesson I learned along the way is that if you really want to change the demographics of your organization, you need to change the power structures in your organizations so that power is distributed differently than in our society. […] We now have targets for gender distribution, age, educational and ethnic background"

The selected cases are therefore not only reputational, but also critical cases as they are particularly important in the scheme of workplace diversity. Patton (2014: 416) argues, therefore, that "it makes strategic sense to pick the site that would yield the most information and have the greatest impact on the development of knowledge". While studying only two critical cases does not technically permit broad generalizations to all possible cases, it does allow for logical generalizations to be made from the weight of evidence produced in studying these cases (Patton, 2014).

In sum, the two selected organizations clearly stood out in the first interview round in terms of their knowledge and reputation. The two organizations are furthermore very similar in size and demographic composition making them suitable to look at similarities or differences with regard to workplace diversity and ensuring the credibility of our findings.

Table 4 Workforce composition by organization

| | Gender | | Ethnic diversity workforce[16] | Employees (N) |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| | *Male* | *Female* | | |
| **Organization A** | 31% | 69% | 49% | 93 |
| **Organization B** | 36% | 64% | 62% | 92 |

Organization A is an organization offering contextual guidance or 'context-oriented support'. This means that they offer support or guidance provided to individuals, families, and their broader network in a manner that is tailored to their specific needs and concerns. The focus lies in understanding the individuals' or family's context and working collaboratively to find the most suitable support or guidance approach. The organization consists of 'daycentres' located in various regions of the same city. These daycentres are differentiated based on target groups' age categories and they offer group activities for children (6 – 12 y/o), teenagers (12 – 17 y/o) as well as individual contextual counselling for young adults (17 – 25 y/o) and families. As such, employees have a shared (group-home counselling) and individual (individual counselling) responsibility to assist families in different living situations and are given discretionary power to fulfil this task. The organizations' employees are ethnically diverse (see Table 5), however with a majority being Belgian or Belgian-born of Moroccan descent.

Organization B is a community development organization. Their goal is to build and foster inclusive communities where everyone has a place and employees are tasked with bringing together individuals who experience exclusion and work with them, as well as partners, to find concrete solutions. As such, the organization offers community service on topics such as social protection, employment, housing, and collective citizenship. They, hence, offer low threshold community service (e.g., administrative aid) and create participatory project work with citizens (e.g., advocacy work) to work on both practical and sustainable solutions. The metropolitan setting in which Organization B is located makes especially issues of racism a high priority. The organizations' employees are from various ethnic background, but again, a majority being Belgian or Belgian-born of Moroccan descent (see Table 6).

[16] of which respectively 77% and 79% born in Belgium to migrant parents

## Data collection

This section deals with the data collection process that informed subsequent research. Data was collected using semi-structured in-depth interviews. This research methodology is proven to be useful to gain insight in individuals and their so-called life worlds. It more specifically allows a focus on the emerging languages and meanings individuals assign to their experience by looking at their motivations, meanings and perceptions towards workplace diversity (Berg, 2001). As is commonly known, this approach involves careful attention to the positions of researchers and the researched. I will elaborate on the relation between myself and interviewees in chapter four with relation to my ethnic background. However, as my social and personal involvement has been a fundamental part of the data collection process, this section will not only deal with the rigorous processes of collecting data but also with the politics of interviewing[17] in general. I therefore discuss the research interviews as well as the consequential development of my understanding of the nature of the research relationship.

### *Ethical considerations*

For both interview rounds with leaders and employees, participants received an ethical clearance which was approved prior by the university of Antwerp. I had little problems gaining consent; however, some respondents did again insist that the interviews stay anonymous as well as all the names they mentioned. They explained that they would perhaps refer to other organizations or colleagues and, I assume, they did not want to compromise their relationship or position. Either way, I ensured their anonymity in the ethical clearance form (see appendix) as well as verbally at the start of the interview. At this point, I also explained again the goal of my research which I described as gaining insight into workplace diversity (in its broadest sense) in nonprofit organizations and that I, with their permission, would like to audio-record the interviews. Participants were informed that the recordings would not be shared or published, would remain in my possession of and would be processed anonymously.

The audio recordings and the information that identified participants could only be accessed by myself as they were encrypted in a folder on the university sever linked to my credentials. Immediately after the interviews, I would often audio record myself with my main

[17] 'The politics of interviewing' is a concept used by Limerick et al. (1996) to address the power dynamics and ethical considerations that come in to play within the context of conducting interviews. In that sense, it is more specific then for example positionality or reflexivity, which are more overarching concepts that encompass the researcher's self-awareness and engagement in the research process.

reflections about the interview. All the interviews were transcribed in a semi-verbatim manner, meaning that the transcripts remain close to the meaning and content by including stop words and pauses, for example, but the emphasis lies in understanding the participants' perspectives and experiences rather than analyzing the specific language use. As such, the transcript conveys the essence and context of the conversation, while still guaranteeing is readability. The first round of interviews was transcribed my myself, while the second round were transcribed by students who signed a confidentiality agreement and were given strict transcription guidelines.

Before conducting interviews, I had also prepared myself on how to deal with possible difficulties (e.g., desirability or participant discomfort) that may arise during the qualitative research process. (e.g., Patton, 2014; Seidman, 2006). However, I am compelled to admit that I had not carefully prepared myself for the extent to which respondents' ethnic majority and minority background in particular, would affect the interviews because of my ethnic background. In that sense, I had prepared myself in the 'conventional' way as a researcher: I had guided myself through several methodological articles on social desirability (cf. Bowman, 2007) and the potential risks when interviewing respondents on sensitive topics such as diversity, discrimination, racism etc. (cf. Corbin and Morse, 2003). While this material aptly guided me through how I can prevent participant distress is my interviewing skills and guide myself by sensitivity and ethics, it oversaw potentials risks for the researcher. Only after encountering several difficulties and moving myself through them, emotionally and professionally, I came to realize that there is simply little research that guides and prepares ethnic minority researchers for the obstacles they may endure when conducting diversity research (I elaborate on this further in chapter four).[18]

*Round 1*

A first round of data collection took place from October until December 2020 with leaders and coordinators of various nonprofit organizations in the region Flanders. Prior to actually conducting in-depth interviews, I first gathered more information on the participating organizations though information that was made available on their websites such as their mission, vision, activities, and, when available, reports. I first attended a training session run

[18] Moreover, as rightfully noticed by Kostet (2022: 90) this realization further strengthened a feeling of 'loneliness' as I was again reminded that, just like in the organizations I was researching, I did not belong to the 'norm' in the academic world either, and that '*joint reflection on these methodological issues, at least that which is free from power imbalances, is for those who do*'. This, on its turn, opened a new door to facing the challenges of knowledge production which I will try to address briefly in chapter four and the concluding reflections of this dissertation.

by the Flemish sociocultural umbrella organization on intercultural solidarity, as well as several workshops, lectures and training events targeted at organizational actors such as leaders or diversity coordinators. These training sessions and workshops gave me the opportunity to get in touch with some respondents and make appointments for interviews. Due to COVID-19 restrictions, most in-depth interviews took place online through Zoom or Microsoft Teams. The semi-structured questionnaire covered topics related to the participants' definition and perception of diversity, recruitment of minorities, workplace diversity discourses and practices and perceptions of the role of stakeholders regarding diversity (see appendix for a translated copy). The interviews lasted between one and two hours.

Conducting interviews with leaders of nonprofit organizations turned to be challenging for many reasons. Evidently, my position as a young female scholar from a minority ethnic background had important consequences for research into this topic. One could even say that I myself could be included as a research subject. First, facing predominantly ethnic majority leaders on the topic of diversity gave rise to certain dynamics in the research relationship that might not have been there had we shared the same ethnic background. Initially, I assumed respondents might be conscious about making statements about sexism or racism and try to persuade me that they are aware of diversity issues (especially working in the nonprofit sector) and emphasize 'resistance' towards an anti-diversity discourse or 'emancipation'. To limit this and unravel the meaning and their perceptions of workplace diversity, I asked additional questions at several points during the interviews, encouraging respondents to illustrate their replies with examples of workplace practices and how they (would) respond when a certain situation would occur. However, the social desirability that I had expected was eventually limited to what Alvesson and Kärreman (2011) refer to as 'discursive smartness': respondents indeed legitimized acting in certain ways and demonstrated awareness, but their actions, both towards myself as in their organizations were decoupled from this. During the interviews, any discursive smartness – if shown – was decoupled from their comments and ideas on ethnic minority groups and my own ethnic background. These were reflected in their choice of words such as 'vreemdelingen' or 'foreigners' and in essentialist assumptions about, for example, the consumption, cultural preferences of minority ethnic groups in general. To establish trust and a safe environment for the respondent, I chose to adopt the same language, by, for example, similarly using words such as 'vreemdelingen'. Of course, this felt odd, because I was referring to myself as something that is 'foreign' or 'strange'. This strategy, however, did allow me to focus and elaborate on examples of everyday workplace practices.

This brings me to the second challenged endured, which lies not so much in ensuring the reliability and validity of my research, rather than emotionally dealing with essentialist and even paternalistic discourses on ethnic minorities. At several times during the interviews, the vulnerability of being a researcher with an ethnic minority background became unmistakable. Some conversations, which I will elaborate on in chapter four, can at best be described as imbued with symbolic violence towards me as well as toward ethnic minorities in general. This made conducting interviews an arduous labour as I was not only burdened with providing a 'neutral' analysis for my data but also dealing with great emotional difficulties and the lack of methodological tools to protect myself in the research process.

*Round 2*

A second round of the data collection consisted of interviewing leaders and employees of the two selected organizations (see Table 5 and Table 6). In total 40 semi-structured in-depth interviews (23 and 17 respectively) with employees and two directors were conducted during the period of February 2022 and May 2022. Conversations ranged from thirty minutes to nearly two hours and were conducted in Dutch. They mostly took place in a private room in the organization, only three employees preferred to talk in a quiet place outside. Participants were both long-term and short-term employees (ranging between one year employment to over twenty years). In organization A, we also participated in a welcome course for beginning employees as well as a diversity workgroup while in organization B we spend time in community centers informally talking to employees and volunteers. There was no selection made based on any fixed identity characteristic but, as already mentioned, I did choose these organizations because they are considered critical cases. The diversity mostly refers to employees' ethnic and/or religious background. A majority of respondents had either an ethnic majority or Moroccan background, but some also mentioned being of Turkish, Indian, Syrian or Egyptian ancestry.

While the interview period only lasted for three months, I quickly and easily felt welcomed by the organizations and their employees. All employees were informed by their management that I would be doing interviews and, as such, employees often recognized me when I was in the organization. They often – in my regard – seemed happy to make small talk about their jobs as well as their personal lives and the love for their jobs. I experienced the same during interviews, where respondents would gladly share many details about the organization and their jobs. While this did allow for what I perceived to be honest and heartfelt interviews,

it did require some awareness on my behalf. For example, it sometimes became an exercise to avoid a therapeutic relation with respondents. As counsellors and community workers in a sector with many challenges and a city characterized by social and ethnic inequality, many of the respondents have had to deal with difficult situations with regard to their target group. Diversity, to them, is therefore strongly linked with the marginalization, exclusion, and precarious situations of minority communities. As such, conversations would sometimes wander off the subject of workplace diversity and become quite emotional both for myself and for the respondent. In this case, I said little and continued listening until I did find a moment to ask if these difficult moments in their counselling were talked through with colleagues and how they interacted with each other on these matters. Doing this, allowed for the participant (and myself) to work out the distress without interfering or taking responsibility for it, while still redirecting the conversation back to relationships in the workplace (see also Seidman, 2006).

With ethnic minority employees in particular, participants quickly assumed a shared background. They would, therefore, easily talk about their negative experiences and position in Flemish institutions with the assumption that I agreed and understood. Some instances, I could indeed empathize with their experiences of feeling excluded or mistreated, or they at least sounded very familiar to me. They would also talk with Moroccan or 'Islamic' stop words such as *Alhamdulillah* (meaning 'praise be to God'), abruptly interrupting themselves and say 'well, *you* know', or, to my slight discomfort tell me how proud they were that I, as a Moroccan, am a doctoral student, since that is certainly not a given. Other times, their experiences were of course completely unfamiliar to me for various reasons, one of them being that I have never experienced working as a counsellor in the welfare sector. Overall, I felt that it was important to acknowledge their assumption and explore the relationship between their personal experiences and the subject of the inquiry. As such, I expressed my understanding, but I did however inquire them to elaborate with examples and their feelings on certain matters:

Respondent: We people of colour have a sense of urgency when it comes to this. It's always one or two people that really want to commit [to diversity]. But actually, that shouldn't even be the case, because it's just about humanity. That's the terrible thing about it all, that you have to deal with that on top of your work. They don't understand that, but for us, it's self-evident. We are just here, we live here, we work here, we put in as much effort as anyone else. But it's almost expected of you because you know all about it,

| | |
|---|---|
| | because you are a person of colour. That's also very exhausting. Well, you probably know this. |
| Interviewer: | Is that what you experienced? |
| Respondent: | Yes, I have been in that situation […] and it is still a trauma. I often doubt myself if I can do this work. |

Table 5 Research participants of organization A, by gender and ethnic background

| Organization A | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| **Respondents** | **Position** | **Gender** | **Ethnic background** |
| **Respondent 1** | Counsellor | M | Belgium |
| **Respondent 2** | Counsellor | F | Morocco |
| **Respondent 3** | Counsellor | F | Morocco |
| **Respondent 4** | Counsellor | F | Belgium |
| **Respondent 5** | Counsellor | M | Morocco |
| **Respondent 6** | Counsellor | F | Belgium |
| **Respondent 7** | Counsellor | F | Belgium |
| **Respondent 8** | Counsellor | F | Ghana |
| **Respondent 9** | Counsellor | M | Belgium |
| **Respondent 10** | Counsellor | F | Morocco |
| **Respondent 11** | Counsellor | F | Turkey |
| **Respondent 12** | Counsellor | F | Morocco |
| **Respondent 13** | Counsellor | M | Belgium |
| **Respondent 14** | Counsellor | F | Belgium |
| **Respondent 15** | Counsellor | M | Morocco |
| **Respondent 16** | Counsellor | M | Egypt |
| **Respondent 17** | Counsellor | F | Belgium |
| **Respondent 18** | Counsellor | F | Belgium |
| **Respondent 19** | Counsellor | F | Morocco |
| **Respondent 20** | Counsellor | F | Morocco |
| **Respondent 21** | Counsellor | F | Belgium |
| **Respondent 22** | Counsellor | M | Moroccan |
| **Respondent 23** | Secretary | F | Belgium |

Table 6 Research participants of organization B, by gender and ethnic background

| Organization B | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| **Respondents** | **Position** | **Gender** | **Ethnic background** |
| **Respondent 1** | Community worker | M | Morocco |
| **Respondent 2** | Community worker | M | Morocco |
| **Respondent 3** | Community worker | F | India |
| **Respondent 4** | Community worker | F | Belgium |
| **Respondent 5** | Community worker | F | Belgium |
| **Respondent 6** | Community worker | F | Belgium |
| **Respondent 7** | Community worker | F | Belgium |
| **Respondent 8** | Community worker | F | Morocco |
| **Respondent 9** | Community worker | M | Morocco |
| **Respondent 10** | Community worker | F | Morocco |
| **Respondent 11** | Community worker | M | Morocco |
| **Respondent 12** | Community worker | F | Belgium |
| **Respondent 13** | Community worker | M | Belgium |
| **Respondent 14** | Community worker | M | Syria |
| **Respondent 15** | Community worker | M | Belgium |
| **Respondent 16** | Community worker | F | Turkey |
| **Respondent 17** | Community worker | F | Belgium |

## Data analysis

Critical realism provides a philosophical basis and theoretical ground for conducting critical analysis (Frauley and Pearce, 2007). As mentioned earlier, critical realism allows researcher in social – and more specifically organization – studies to examine a social phenomenon as being intertwined with its broader context (Archer et al., 2013). It more specifically, situates workplace diversity as embedded in and evolving with the organizational context over time and enables us to understand how agency is created, and which structures are produced on account of this agency. A critical analysis, then, provides a suitable framework for examining the underlying (power) structures, mechanisms and processes that shape workplace in the context of nonprofit organizations and, hence, to gain a deeper understanding of the organizational and societal factors at play (Alvesson and Willmott, 1992). Within this critical analysis framework, I have respectively used thematic analysis and narrative analysis in a complementary way. Drawing on thematic analysis in the first interview round, I was able to lay a foundation for identifying key themes and patterns within the data, which I then further explored and analyzed using narrative analysis techniques in the second interview round. This integration allowed me to delve into the symbolic elements and the narrative constructions within the identified themes, enhancing the understanding of participants' experiences and the ways in which they articulate their narratives (Wertz, 2011). In using this analytical framework, I apply what Hodgkinson and Starkey (2012) refer to as multiple generative mechanism, that is, an analysis of the dynamic interplay of structure and agency within and across levels of analysis, while avoiding determinism and reification or essentialism (Hodgkinson and Starkey, 2012: 608).

### *Round 1*

Thematic analysis is a flexible qualitative research method that allows researchers to identify, analyze, and interpret patterns or themes within data. In line with King and Horrocks (2010), I define 'themes' as "recurrent and distinctive features of participants' accounts, characterizing particular perceptions and/or experiences, which the researcher sees as relevant to the research questions" (King and Horrocks, 2010; Cassell et al., 2017). In this first round of interviews, I aimed to uncover and critically examine how workplace diversity as a social phenomenon is intertwined with its broader organization and societal context as seen from the perspective of organizational leaders. I inquired with the participants on their definition of diversity, its implications on the workforce, their diversity policy and motivations for incorporating

workplace diversity as well as how workplace diversity in their organizations' is related to other stakeholders. The analysis, therefore, involved questioning taken-for-granted assumptions about the conceptualization of diversity, with the goal of unravelling its meaning, the power dynamics at play, and examining how social and cultural contexts shape the experiences and perspectives of nonprofit leaders. In order to contribute to a deeper understanding of the complexities and nuances within the data, I first immersed myself in theoretical insights on diversity from organization and management studies, critical scholarship and nonprofit diversity literature. While I adopted an inductive approach for themes to emerge directly from the interviews, the theoretical insights were necessary to guide me in the questions that I would ask my respondents. As King and Brooks (2021) state, this is inevitable because:

> […] themes do not exist independently from the researcher carrying out the analysis. They are not like a fossil hidden in a rock, waiting for someone to come along and break it open to discover them. While there are different philosophical positions on how themes relate to the actual experiences of research participants, we maintain that even in the mostly strongly realist approaches they cannot be considered as objective entities (Cassell et al., 2017: 220).

Drawing on twenty-five transcriptions of in-depth interviews with organizational leaders, I subsequently started analyzing the data. This process involved multiple iterations of coding and theme development to identify meaningful patterns within the data. Codes were generated in NVivo and based on key concepts, experiences, and perspectives expressed by the participants. I aimed to develop clear and concise description for the codes and the type of organizations, supported by relevant quotes and examples from the interviews. This process involved close examination of the data and careful consideration of the context in which the participants' statements were made. The codes were then organized and grouped into potential themes, highlighting commonalities and variations across the interviews. I frequently revised the codes which included discursive elements on recruitment requisites, legitimation, perception of minority employees, accountability toward stakeholders and material practices for 'managing' workplace diversity. The themes were refined through constant comparison and discussion with my supervisors, ensuring their coherence and relevance to the research objectives. By doing this, and going back and forth to the literature, it was established that the themes aligned with and would be centred around Maier and Meyers' (2011) typology on nonprofit governance (see Table 7). Following the identification of themes, each theme was thus defined based on the typology to capture its essence.

Multiple times, I engaged in reflective discussions with my supervisors to interpret the themes and uncover the underlying meanings embedded within the interviews. This process provided a rich and nuanced account of the leaders' perspectives on workplace diversity, shedding light on key discourses, issues, challenges, and opportunities identified through the analysis. As the data collection and analysis overlapped, these steps were performed several times. This means that I had already started transcribing and coding during the first interviews and linked this back to the analysis. This iterative process also allowed me to ask more specific questions about certain topics in the subsequent interviews. It can also be seen as promoting validity and allowing us to avoid and limit systematic bias in our results.

Table 7 Example of coding process based on thematic analysis

| Quote | Code | Assigned theme |
|---|---|---|
| *'People with a non-Dutch sounding name do apply for jobs, but they don't succeed, and I will not… I'll invite them for an interview to try to get more personnel diversity, but most of the time it starts with an application letter of which I think… You know, I want to take a lot of things into consideration but I'm not going to lower my requirements […] just because someone has another ethnic background by chance. So, I'm not going to discriminate positively. Someone has to reach the standard.'* | Importance of language skills | Professional discourse |

*Round 2*

Narrative analysis relies on thematic analysis and acknowledges that actors and their experiences will likely be ubiquitous and multivocal. The main focus of narrative analysis is the story itself, particularly first-person accounts by respondents of their experiences (Riessman, 1993). There is, therefore, never a single self-representation (Riessman, 1993). However, fundamental to this inquiry is the idea that in order to understand the social phenomenon we are researching, we also have to illuminate the parts that is constitutes, which in turn enhances our understanding of the phenomenon under study. As an interpretive

method[19], it thus bridges the gap between micro practices and macro structures and aims to establish connections between individual subjective worlds and macro organizational and institutional processes and phenomena (Prasad and Prasad, 2002). The core of narrative analysis is also notably described by Wertz (2011) as the following:

> What is perhaps unique to narrative research is that it endeavours to explore the whole account rather than fragmenting it into discursive units or thematic categories. It is not the parts that are significant in human life, but how the parts are integrated to create a whole—which is meaning. […] Narrative analysis focuses, then, on patterned relationships in the flow of events and experience within a multivoiced self that is in mutually constitutive interaction with its social world (Wertz, 2011: 226).

As such, the second round of interview data was gathered with the specific goal to unravel how participants (i.e., employees of the two welfare organizations) perceive themselves, how they regulate their identities and how this is interconnected with how they locate themselves in the broader organization and in society. My research was framed within a context of understanding workplace diversity from the perspective of employees. I hence inquired participants to share their definition of diversity, their perception of themselves and how this identification narrative in intertwined with their position within the organization, in relation to colleagues and even the broader society.

In conducting narrative analysis for this study, I employed a multi-step approach. Initially, I collected extensive information on the organizations' subgroups in different neighborhoods, employee mobilization groups, and socio-demographic data of employees provided by the organizations. This data served as the foundation for the analysis. Through the lens of narrative analysis, I sought to uncover how differences were perceived and meaningful to employees within their workplace. In drawing upon these narratives, employees were able to represent their identities and surroundings which also allowed for them to organize their experiences into meaningful episodes (Fraser, 2004). This approach emphasized the socially

[19] While the established work of Burell and Morgan (1979) on sociological paradigms and organizational analysis makes a clear separation between interpretivism and critique, I adopt here the argument of several organization and management scholars such as Prasad and Prasad (2002) that an extensive interpretative analysis allows for fundamental questionings that can be critically oriented and that, therefore, the lines between these two approaches can become blurry. In chapter three of this dissertation, for example, I draw on a poststructuralist approach using a narrative analysis to deconstruct 'diversity' through the perspectives of employees. In doing so, I was able to reveal underlying processes of identity work and power dynamics.

constructed and context-dependent nature of (inter)subjective reasoning, and hence applies the concept of thick description as understood by (Geertz, 2008).

Our coding process began with inductively screening through each transcript and, in Microsoft Word, adding comments to meaningful statements on various themes such as 'defining diversity', 'cultural identity', 'organizational identity', 'racism', 'discrimination', 'sense of self', 'diversity policy', and 'organizational structure' (see e.g., Table 8). Subsequently, I delved deeper into each case, conducting a more nuanced analysis of these topics. As I combined the cases again, I refined the coding process, identifying potential similarities and differences between respondents. Our analysis focused on comprehending how workplace diversity was introduced into the organization and its structure and how organizational actors attributed meaning to workplace diversity as well as how they negotiate their identities in this environment.

Finally, in order to remain sensitive to nuances of the meanings expressed and the different contexts in which the meaning may enter, a narrative analysis requires us to engage with the theoretical literature. As such, during this last phase, we drew up more on theoretical frameworks of diversity (management), institutional logics and theory of hybrids to better understand the organizational processes we encountered in the interviews. By utilizing narrative analysis and employing theoretical frameworks, we aimed to gain insights into the complexities of workplace diversity and its implications within the organizational context. This approach allowed us to go beyond surface-level understanding and delve into the intricate dynamics of diversity as experienced and interpreted by employees within these organizations.

Table 8 Example of themes that emerged based on narrative analysis

| | Quote | Analysis |
|---|---|---|
| **Organization A** | *I think we're doing good here… I mean I feel free to be who I am and I think others feel the same… In terms of expressing their beliefs, religion language…* | → sense of 'being who you are'<br>→ freedom to express beliefs |
| **Organization B** | *'I feel like diversity is fully integrated in the personnel policy as well as in the organization as a whole. In that sense, you can be who you are here'* | → organizational diversity policies<br>→ sense of 'being who you are' |

However, despite of its potential for capturing the symbolic dimensions of organizational life (Prasad and Prasad, 2002), there as an important peril of narrative analysis which lies in its interpretive nature. Interpretive research often involves subjective interpretation and analysis of data, which can be influenced by the researcher's own biases and assumptions (Sandberg, 2005). For example, different researchers may interpret the same narrative differently, leading to potential variations in findings and conclusions. Indeed, at several points my supervisors and I had different interpretations of the data. Where I, for example, perceived participant views and standpoints as predominantly guided by a professional logic, they would interpret this in terms of participants' need of a community logic. Through multiple discussions and reflections on the data, we however often established that both interpretations were correct, which allowed for the analysis to be refined. While this allowed for more rigor and reliability, I believe the validity of our results was especially ensured by the application of a member's checking approach. This method addresses the co-constructed nature of knowledge by providing participants with the opportunity to engage with, and add to interview and interpreted data (Birt et al., 2016). A few months after conducting in-depth interviews, I hence presented my data to

leaders and some members[20] of the two organizations. The goal of this was to not only reciprocate towards my research participants who were very eager to know what the research had yielded but also to corroborate accuracy through dialogue and consensus building. While I laid out my results, I explicitly told them that these were only based on my interpretation and that I was there to learn from them about the organizations they operate in daily. As such, I actively engaged them to go into dialogue, which we did, leading to the trustworthiness of our results.

## Concluding reflections

In sum, the research approach in this dissertation is informed by a qualitative method and guided by principles of a critical realist approach. I believe the adopted research approach and method allows for a critical examination of the intricate interplay between organizational characteristics and processes in shaping how differences are constituted. Most importantly is the applied data analysis where general themes were identified to assess leadership perspectives and organizational characteristics after which I aimed to delve deeper into the life worlds of organizations, assessing individual subjective worlds and organizational and institutional processes and phenomena. This investigating of diversity from multiple angles and levels of analysis, I believe, is especially relevant to address the previously noted epistemological and ontological standpoints of workplace diversity that can be seen as the common thread of this dissertation. With this, I mean that my methodologic approach has primarily sought to question taken-for-granted assumptions about the conceptualization of diversity, with the goal of unravelling its meaning as well as disentangle who is subject to the notion of diversity and through which processes. Ultimately, I believe such an assessment helps shed light on the underlying values, social and organizational processes, and power dynamics that shape our understanding and treatment of workplace diversity.

In chapter one and four, the research respectively addresses how diversity is conceptualized and comes into practice through the perspectives of nonprofit leaders and, on a more meta-theoretical level, what these conceptualizations reveal about the researcher-researched relationship. These two chapters hence draw on data of the first interview round conducted with nonprofit leaders of twenty-five nonprofit organizations. Chapter two and three, on the other hand, deal with the perspectives on nonprofit employees and leaders in two welfare

[20] The employees who joined the 'feedback sessions' did so voluntarily and out of interest. Not all of them were participants in the study.

organizations. Based on a narrative analysis, these chapters address the second research question proposed in this dissertation, that is; how are organizational structures and actor identities interconnected with the established differentiation in terms of diversity?

# PART II

# Chapter 1
# Diversifying the workplace in nonprofit organizations: discourses and perspectives on ethnic diversity

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## Introduction

In the past few decades, there have been various understandings of diversity, and numerous studies have explored how identities and diversity are constructed in specific social, historical and organizational contexts (Zanoni and Janssens, 2004; Özbilgin, 2019). However, defining diversity remains a slippery and challenging endeavour, mainly because the characteristics that are perceived as prominent in formatting identities are not consistent over time, space and cultural context; diversity is therefore a geographically, temporally and culturally contingent phenomenon (Gotsis and Kortezi, 2015). Despite this, diversity studies generally define the term by reference to sociodemographic (gender, race, ethnicity and age) and sociocultural characteristics (educational level, financial status, social class, religion etc.). The term is thus all-embracing but conceals power and inequality (Benschop, 2001; Ahmed and Swan, 2006) and the influences of context (Zanoni et al., 2010; Özbilgin, 2019).

The goal of this study is to offer a better understanding of workplace diversity in the context of nonprofit organizations. Our contribution focuses on the sociodemographic composition of employees and pays specific attention to ethnicity. We do this by exploring discourses on workplace diversity among leaders of various nonprofit organizations. Several studies have already demonstrated how specific organizational features and missions influence organizations' commitment to diversity (see Janssens and Zanoni, 2021; Tomlinson and Schwabenland, 2010; Robinson, 2020b; Eikenberry et al., 2019). This commitment to diversity is most often described in terms of approaches based on utilitarian arguments (the 'business approach') or approaches based on 'social justice'. The business approach addresses how diversity affects organizational practices and outcomes and aims to understand how and to what extent diversity in the organization is able to improve nonprofit performance by capitalizing on its benefits (e.g., Brimhall, 2019; Weisinger et al., 2016; Villotti et al., 2019). In contrast with this, scholars embracing the social justice approach have recently highlighted issues of inequality and inequity in the sector, emphasizing that because nonprofit organizations aim to

reflect the public they seek to serve, they often legitimize exclusion and become a playing field for unequal power relations (Heckler, 2019; Nickels & Leach, 2021; Knoppers et al., 2015).

We, however, argue that there is a need to look more systematically at the dynamics of workplace diversity in nonprofit organizations, beyond the dualism of business and social justice approaches. The nonprofit sector is a complex range of different organizations, interacting with various actors such as beneficiaries, group members, volunteers, staff, boards, private or public funders, all of which have a different impact on how diversity is approached (Maier and Meyer, 2011). In order to bring a better understanding of the varying discourses on diversity in nonprofit organizations, we centre our analysis around Maier and Meyer's (2011) typology of the various notions of nonprofit governance discourses.

For the purpose of this chapter we will focus on NPO leaders, as their leadership position is very likely to influence work outcomes, organizational programmes and the overall performance of organizations (Aboramadan and Dahleez, 2020). We propose to address the following question: What are the discourses nonprofit leaders draw upon to describe their commitment to diversity in the workplace? We examine this question by studying the diversity discourses and practices of 25 welfare and sociocultural nonprofits in the Belgian region of Flanders. Our data suggests that the conceptualization of diversity is tied to the organizational discourse, which is determined by organizations' governance mechanisms. We find that the degree to which diversity becomes a matter of interest or not in NPO's depends on its fit with the organizations' governance discourse. Following the typology of Maier & Meyers (2011), we find, for example, that leaders in organizations with a predominant grassroots discourse show less interest in pursuing diversity practices in recruitment efforts and are generally more focused on attracting those who are committed to their cause (see also Walker & Stepnick, 2014). Finally, our analysis also shows the high degree of discretionary power that leaders have when implementing diversity practices. This means that organizational leaders' personal experiences and values play an important role in choosing on the extent to which and how they approach workplace diversity (see also Fulton et al., 2019; Brimhall, 2019).

The scientific value of this study is twofold. Firstly, when taken together, existing studies offer mainly single-level explorations of diversity and equality issues. They predominantly research board diversity and to a much lesser extent workplace diversity, more specifically whether and how the organization is developing a discourse on diversity and implementing practices in the workplace. In addition, they pay little attention to the overall functioning of the organization, such as the interplay between diversity discourses and

practices, stakeholders and employee expectations as well as organizational goals, rules and routines and how these can relate to the way diversity is perceived (Nachmias et al., 2021).

Secondly, we argue that it is of critical importance to produce workplace diversity research that matters for social change, as organizations play a key role in (re)producing inequality in contemporary societies and the structuring of inequality along social identities (Janssens and Zanoni, 2021; Coule and Carole Bain; Dodge et al., 2021). However, in order to understand how workplace diversity contributes to nonprofits' mission of civic engagement and social change, we need to gain a better understanding of how nonprofits construct diversity in the workplace. The contribution of this study then lies in its exploration of workplace diversity as contingent upon different organizational discourses of governance such as civic, grassroots or professionalist discourses. This approach enables us to examine how and when diversity becomes emancipatory (Ahonen et al., 2014). The civic and grassroots discourse for example respectively refer to the way organizations aim to strengthen a sense of collectivism or establish grassroots democracy (Maier and Meyer, 2011), which may impact how diversity is approached. We believe that such research is especially relevant to this sector, as nonprofit organizations operate for a collective or social benefit, and in many cases a significant part of their social mission is aimed at alleviating inequalities and tackling dominant power dynamics, in some cases through advocacy work. Despite this social emancipatory role, we find that only few nonprofit organizations have approached workplace diversity from a more critical perspective.

## Diversity beyond business and social justice rationales

Literature on workplace diversity is often rooted in classic conceptions of diversity management in for-profit organizations. Many studies in this research area focus on empirically assessing the effect of diversity on organizational effectiveness and thus predominantly perceive workplace diversity instrumentally, in terms of potential performance outcomes or a 'diversity dividend' (Bernstein et al., , 2015). This longstanding business-like approach to diversity originated in organization and management studies and undoubtedly left an important imprint on how diversity is approached within nonprofit scholarship (Sanders and McClellan, 2014). In addition, a large body of nonprofit diversity literature is focused on board diversity (Fredette et al., 2016; Fredette and Sessler Bernstein, 2019; Bernstein et al., 2015; Cody et al., 2022; Harris, 2014), but does not look at diversity in workplace settings. Buse et al. (2016) are right to stress that "diversity within nonprofit boards holds potential for insuring that organizational programs and services reflect the needs and interests of the community and for bringing multiple

perspectives into boardrooms", but at the same time there is little to no data on the diversity experiences and knowledge of actors in the nonprofit workplace, be they staff or clients (Nickels and Leach, 2021; Feit, 2019).

In organizational diversity studies, managerialism is often related to a 'business case' for diversity, which calls for 'capitalizing on diversity' and hence mobilizing workplace diversity as an 'asset' for the organization to improve service delivery and economic productivity (Swan and Fox, 2010). In the case of nonprofit organizations, this means that workplace diversity is framed in terms of the value it brings to the social mission of the organization. At the other end of the scale, scholars have widely criticized this approach, stating that diversity should focus on material redistribution and cultural recognition as requirements for organizations to be fully inclusive of diversity (Swan, 2015). In the following we will consider the still existing tensions in nonprofit literature between valuing diversity for instrumental, managerial reasons and valuing diversity for intrinsic, justice reasons. We will subsequently move beyond this basic dichotomy to reconceptualize diversity as an organizational product.

Opinions are divided as to how diversity should be and is approached in nonprofit organizations. Some argue that the two cases for diversity are compatible in nonprofit organizations, as – from a managerial approach to nonprofit governance – being business-like and hence treating diversity as an organizational asset is compatible with the social justice mission of nonprofits (Sanders and McClellan, 2014). Others argue that business and social justice rationales are inherently contradictory. Several arguments are put forward for this. A managerial conception of diversity not only conceals the persistence of systematic inequalities and discrimination affecting historically disadvantaged groups, it also perpetuates gendered and racialized structures and individualizes and depoliticizes societal problems (Noon, 2007; Gotsis and Kortezi, 2015: 17; Ahmed, 2007a; Heckler, 2019; Nickels and Leach, 2021; Noon, 2018; Keevers et al., 2012; Maier et al., 2016). Hence, such an approach defines diversity solely within relations of 'value' and devalues substantive rationalities based on empathy, religion, aesthetics etc. (Maier & Meyer, 2011), which in turn creates a skewed power distribution.

The distribution of power that arises in organizations can hamper workplace democracy and participation in favour of dominant group members, boards, private or public funders (Baines et al., 2011; Keevers et al., 2012; Maier et al., 2016). This can lead organizations to become trapped in institutional 'interlocks', as change efforts can be undermined by other institutions' reluctance to change, keeping societal issues like diversity peripheral (Jonsen et al., 2013). Amstutz et al. (2021) for example draw upon the notion of 'logic of appropriateness'.

They show that organizations, although they intend to reduce gender inequalities through organizational policies, are hindered from doing so because they are reliant on acceptance by other organizations, which leads to a reproduction of heteronormativity.

Despite the wide-ranging debate on managerialism in the nonprofit literature, there is a need to move beyond a classic understanding of business approaches and to take into account different and distinctive discourses of nonprofit governance necessary to capture the broad variety of organizations in this sector. Nonprofits draw on various discursive resources (e.g., their grassroots or civic discourse) to produce a range of overlapping meanings for diversity that do not always fit with understandings based on the 'business versus social justice' binary (Tomlinson & Schwabenland, 2010; Janssens & Zanoni, 2005). An approach to workplace diversity cannot, therefore, be tied to one discourse only, whether this is informed by business or social justice; rather, it is driven by a multiplicity of ideas, motivations and agendas (Swan and Fox, 2010). In our attempt to draw attention to the many ways nonprofit leaders approach diversity, we argue that the nonprofit's overall organizational governance shapes how diversity in the workplace is perceived and approached, both at a discursive level and in terms of practices, and that tracing these multiple meanings is especially relevant for nonprofit organizations, given that they are not only focused on profit-making but are also mission driven.

## Diversity perspectives and nonprofit governance

To better understand why nonprofit organizations adopt a certain perspective on diversity, we look at characteristics of different types of nonprofit organizations, particularly those relating to their governance, mission, tasks and actors, and we subsequently outline the main diversity perspectives underlying their way of working. A variety of perspectives on diversity within organizations have been identified in the literature (Vos et al., 2016; Ely and Thomas, 2001). They can be classified on a continuum ranging from doing nothing or actively resisting diversity to having an elaborate diversity strategy (Dass and Parker, 1999; Podsiadlowski et al., 2013).

Moving beyond a solely managerialist discourse, Maier and Meyer (2011) developed a typology of discourses on nonprofits and their characteristics. We draw upon their conceptual framework to understand different ways in which diversity can manifest itself in discourses and practices in the workplace of various nonprofit organizations, and how exactly specific workings may impede or facilitate inclusion of diversity. The discourses designate a way of communicating about organizations that is internally consisent and mutually distinctive. Below, we discuss each of these discourses (with the exception of the managerialist discourse, which we referred to in the preceding section) and try to link them to specific approaches to diversity.

However, many of these discourses continue to exist alongside managerialism (Meyer and Maier, 2015).

*Domestic Discourse*

A domestic discourse focuses on the achievement of an explicit mission (e.g. youth welfare work, recreation and social services, development aid). The organization is primarily accountable to their target group, often defined as a group with specific social needs which are not adequately catered for. However, this target group is not necessarily represented within the organization, in which employees are core participants. Relationships between leaders and employees are characterized by mutual loyalty, trust, and personal negotiations; actors are expected to be willing to make big sacrifices to 'fit in with' the organization and division of labour is flexible. Status differences between members are based on intensity and length of their engagement. There is also a flexible and informal way of communicating. Creating an 'atmosphere' where members are considerate of each other and do not argue or compete is important, as well as socializing and meeting for 'cozy' get-togethers. Personnel are recruited on the basis that they are loyal and fit with the group so that organizational harmony can be maintained. High qualifications and performances are of secondary importance.

This 'fitting in' is particularly interesting in terms of diversity. According to Ahmed (2007b), to fit into an organization is also to feel a certain comfort. Allowing difference in the organization can therefore be dependent upon the extent to which these differences undermine feelings of comfort within an organization. As beneficiaries are seen as the primary addressees of governance, we might expect organizations to reinforce homogeneity. Taking a phenomenological approach to examine how some individuals feel more at home and have a sense of fitting in, Ahmed (2007b) states that many institutions have a shared inheritance in whiteness, which affects how we 'inhabit space' and 'who' or 'what' we orient ourselves towards, repeating white habits and producing white space. This leads to what she refers to as 'institutional whiteness', operating through white habits that are inherited and reproduced (Swan, 2015). The ability to belong in an organization can then be seen to depend on the same use of an (upper-)middle class vernacular, body language, dress, belonging to the same residential area, having the same political affiliation, etc. (Heckler, 2017). However, as beneficiaries are organizations' primary addressees, organizations may also feel pressured to commit to diversity as an asset to achieve their mission. For example, to meet the needs of service users, organizations can make it an objective to match their employees' background to that of beneficiaries, to foster a sense of familiarity and support. Diversity is then perceived

from an access perspective, focusing on increasing organizational effectiveness by establishing a better match between organizational demographics and those of critical stakeholders (Podsiadlowski et al., 2013). However, from this perspective we may also expect organizational resistance when it comes to changing structural elements in the organization with regard to diversity, as this is at odds with securing a coherent 'fit' (Fitzsimmons and Callan, 2020).

*Professionalist Discourse*

The professionalist discourse primarily revolves around expertise and discretionary knowledge (e.g., hospitals and other health services, legal services and related assistance, vocational counselling). Organizations aim to achieve performance through professional standards. Employees often work independently, focus on relationships with experts and clients and achieve performance through their knowledge and qualifications. They are guided by ideals and standards that originate from the profession; this creates a shared commitment and a strong professional identity. The personnel practices and recruitment emphasize educational achievements and 'proficiency'. Centring on professional standards, this tenet, in our view, seems to align with a colourblind perspective on diversity, referring to the belief that people should be treated equally no matter where they are from. Qualifications are considered more important than ethnic and cultural background (Maier and Meyer, 2011; Podsiadlowski et al., 2013). Although this colourblind perspective may stem from a well-intentioned desire to avoid bias, a plethora of scholarly work demonstrates that such a perspective can constrain and legitimize practices that maintain class, gender and racial stratification (Siegel et al., 2001; Slay and Smith, 2011; Bonilla-Silva and Embrick, 2006).

*Grassroots Discourse*

A grassroots discourse in organizations revolves around achievement of success through grassroots democracy (e.g. feminist organizations, ethnic associations, organizations promoting local culture, film communities, etc.). Taking a clear position towards substantial matters is crucial and linked with the image and principles of the organization. Members are autonomous but participate in all decisions of the organization, taking personal responsibility for these decisions. There are low requirements when it comes to members' performance in a managerial sense. In many cases the organization is autonomous from funders. In the workplace, egalitarism, collectivism and openness are at the heart of the organization and hierarchies are rejected. Special attention is paid to equal participation of gender groups, but ideally people volunteer on their own initiative and based on identification with the organization (Maier and Meyer, 2011). We therefore suggest that the grassroots discourse implies a fairness perspective

on diversity. Podsiadlowski et al. (2013) see this perspective as focusing on equal and fair treatment so that the demographics of the organization reflect the demographics of society. Adopting a fairness perspective on diversity often means supporting conformism, being aware of the need to overcome potential disadvantages for specific groups. However, as Chen (2009) shows, grassroots movements are often organized in an ad hoc way, attracting those who are committed to their cause, which can result in homogeneous organizational membership by race, age, gender, or other characteristics and potentially reinforce inequality by stratifying positions along racial and gender lines (Chen, 2009). In addition, Walker and Stepick (2014) show that even when grassroots organizations are mindful of sociodemographic differences, this aspect can represent a significant challenge because of the way that sociodemographic identities restrict the formation of collective identities.

*Civic Discourse*

Lastly, organizations with a civic discourse achieve their success by securing mass support, with the goal of unifying and strengthening a sense of collectivism both within the organization as well as towards external actors (e.g. community and neighbourhood organizations, social development, advocacy organizations). Membership plays an important role and organizations have universal rules and democratic procedures in place, granting all members equal rights to participate in decision-making. Recent studies have indeed shown how community (ethnic) representation is associated with the extent to which nonprofit devote efforts to develop advocacy activities (see e.g., Kim and Mason, 2018; Zhang and Guo, 2021), which is associated with a civic discourse. Contrary to other discourses, a civic discourse is highly conscious of diversity, differences of interest, and power struggles, and therefore seeks to secure a broad membership base and reflect the demographics of society. As such, recruitment and personnel practices are concerned with issues of fairness, transparency, and representativeness. Employees are valued as individuals and not only for their specific diversity attributes, and there is an awareness that addressing diversity requires collective and organizational learning. We therefore argue that there is a clear affinity between the civic discourse and an integration and learning perspective on diversity. From this perspective, employees are valued as individuals and not only for specific diversity attributes, allowing organizations to connect diversity issues with collective and organizational learning processes (Bernstein and Bilimoria, 2013; Podsiadlowski et al., 2013; Thomas and Ely, 1996). Nonetheless, research has shown that the aim of civic organizations to achieve participation that reflects societal demographics may

recreate the same power structures and racial inequality, reinforcing issues of social inequity (Feit et al., 2022).

The aim of this research is to show the perspectives of leaders on the organizations' commitment to workplace diversity, and to improve our understanding of how diversity is contingent upon the governance discourse in the organization. As we will see, there is a multilayered understanding of these diversity perspectives, involving different mechanisms of justification: moral responsibility, attracting diverse target groups and reclaiming a legitimate position towards stakeholders, offering organizational provision on behalf of the existing target group, and alleviating social inequalities related to historically marginalized communities. We use the framework developed by Maier and Meyer as presented above, and assess to what extent different perspectives on diversity based on scholarly literature also occur in practice. In this way, we aim to show how diversity perspectives are intertwined with the overall governance, accountability and routine organizational activity of nonprofits.

# Method

Drawing on in-depth interviews and survey data, this research aims to explore how different and distinctive discourses of nonprofit governance can account for leaders' commitment to diversity. In the following paragraphs, we outline our case selection, provide an overview of our research participants and their sociodemographic characteristics, and describe our data collection.

*Case selection*

We initially contacted 50 organizations referred to in a large-scale survey database on civil society. This survey was conducted as part of a large inter-university project called Civil Society and Innovation Flanders (CSI Flanders) (see Laoukili et al., 2019). The data available offered valuable information on just over 500 nonprofit organizations: their (sub)sector, size, members, income, as well as information on how organizations deal with marketization, their relationship with government, ethnic diversity, members, staff and volunteers. We used the survey to select a heterogeneous purposive sample of nonprofit organizations across Flanders. We focused on welfare and sociocultural organizations, which make up the largest part of the CSI Flanders database. More specifically, the data allowed us to select organizations of varying sizes, ranging from small organizations with four employees to more high-capacity nonprofit organizations with more than 100 employees. Furthermore, we narrowed our cases down to organizations that acknowledge ethnic diversity as a challenge. These organizations vary widely in the ethnic composition of their employees. Finally, we included a range of organizations, with several social missions and roles in terms of service delivery, civic engagement and advocacy, with leaders whose types of contact with their personnel varies, and with different organizational structures. According to Flyvbjerg (2006), our cases can be regarded as a very heterogeneous selection of 'critical cases'. This means that the varied nonprofit organizations in our sample were selected strategically in relation to the general topic of this study.

In total, 23 organizations from the CSI dataset were included in this research. Two other organizations were contacted through snowball sampling, as they were frequently mentioned by a majority of organizations as 'an example' when it comes to diversity. We thus ended up analysing empirical data on 25 welfare and sociocultural organizations in the Belgian region of Flanders. The remaining, nonparticipating organizations either did not respond or declined due to a lack of time and having to adjust to the newly imposed COVID-19 regulations in their organizations. Overall, the characteristics of the nonparticipating organizations differed little

from the organizations that did participate in our study. They were similarly heterogeneous in terms of (sub)sector, size, location and ethnic diversity.

An overview of the research participants and characteristics of the selected organizations is presented in Table 2. All respondents but two (organization 11 and 13) belong to the majority ethnic population in Flanders and all occupy a leading position as director or coordinator of an NPO. Respondents in this study function as key decision-makers in the organization and are predominantly tasked with overseeing and acquiring organizational projects, building networks with stakeholders as well as determining recruitment processes and selecting new employees. The use of leaders as key interviewees in this study allowed us to obtain information about the organization, its culture and workings that we as researchers might not be able to perceive and take into consideration (Folch & Ion, 2009). With regard to diversity, interviewing organizational leaders as key interviewees and decision-makers can provide an important window into how nonprofits respond to questions of workplace diversity.

*Data collection*

In a first step, the researcher attended a training session run by the Flemish sociocultural umbrella organization on intercultural solidarity, as well as several workshops, lectures and training events targeted at these key organizational figures. These training sessions and workshops gave the researcher the opportunity to get in touch with respondents and to make appointments for interviews. Due to COVID-19 restrictions, most interviews took place online through Zoom or Microsoft Teams and were conducted and analysed by the first author of this chapter. The semi-structured questionnaire covered topics related to the participants' definition and perception of diversity, recruitment of minorities, workplace diversity discourses and practices and perceptions of the role of stakeholders regarding diversity. The interviews lasted between one and two hours. The researcher's position as a young female scholar from a minority ethnic background may have had important consequences for research into this topic. First, people might have been conscious of sexism or racism and have tried to persuade the researcher that they are aware of diversity issues, while emphasizing 'resistance' towards an anti-diversity discourse or 'emancipation'. As Alvesson and Kärreman (2011) state, this social desirability may be limited to 'discursive smartness', which legitimizes acting in certain ways and demonstrating awareness, while action is decoupled from this. Bearing this in mind, additional questions were asked, encouraging respondents to illustrate their replies with examples of workplace practices. Second, during the interviews the researcher noticed that

leaders made comments and ideas on ethnic minority groups and the researcher's ethnic background. These were reflected in their choice of words such as 'foreigner' and in assumptions about, for example, the consumption, cultural preferences of minority ethnic groups in general. To establish trust and a safe environment, the researcher chose to adopt the same language as respondents, by, for example, similarly using words such as 'foreigners'. This strategy also allowed the researcher to focus and elaborate on examples of everyday workplace practices. We thus conclude that the encounters between mostly majority ethnic leaders and a minority ethnic junior scholar gave rise to certain dynamics that exposed how the researcher's identity is socially less recognized than those of the interviewed groups. While this did lead to feelings of powerlessness and vulnerability, it easily debunked issues of social desirability, as respondents were clearly comfortable speaking freely about their ideas on minority ethnic employees (see also Kostet, 2021; Egharevba, 2001).

*Data analysis*

Finally, the interviews were transcribed and analysed based on the thematic analysis of Clarke and Braun (2014). The transcripts were reread, codes were assigned to certain text fragments and grouped in different themes. The themes were frequently revised and extended, and included discursive elements on legitimation, perception of minority employees, accountability toward stakeholders and material practices for managing workplace diversity. As the data collection and analysis overlapped, these steps were performed several times. This means that we already started transcribing and coding during the first interviews, and linked this back to our analysis. This iterative process allowed us to ask more specific questions about certain topics in the subsequent interviews. It can also be seen as promoting validity and allowing us to avoid and limit systematic bias in our results.

## Results

In this section we will discuss our findings, based on in-depth interviews with leaders in 25 organizations. In the light of the organizing characteristics and narratives of our respondents we will set out the four discourses of governance in these organizations, based on Maier and Meyer (2011), and will subsequently outline the diversity perspectives identified. It is important to note that while these discourses enable a comprehensive view of the social and organizational structure of organizations, they are rarely self-contained and exclusive within one organization. In practice, different discourses coincide but carry unequal weight, making one discourse more dominant than others and therefore more powerful in shaping the organization's governance mechanisms.

*A professionalist discourse: the role of qualifications*

Not surprisingly, many organizational leaders refer to professionalist standards in their recruitment processes. For most nonprofits, organizational work is demand-driven, making it important to achieve performance through professional standards and by ensuring the same professional decision-making process for every individual or client. More in particular, for many respondents in our study the absence or underrepresentation of ethnic minorities was attributed to their inability to meet the organizations' professional standards, in terms of formal qualifications (education, language knowledge) but also of more informal and less tangible qualifications, such as fitting into the organization, self-knowledge or the ability to be a 'good' counsellor.

> "People with a non-Dutch sounding name do apply for jobs, but they don't succeed, and I will not… I'll invite them for an interview to try to get more personnel diversity, but most of the time it starts with an application letter of which I think… You know, I want to take a lot of things into consideration but I'm not going to lower my requirements. We need a strong team to guide all those people with all those preconditions to a job. I can't lower my standards just because someone has another ethnic background by chance. So, I'm not going to discriminate positively. Someone has to reach the standard." (Director, organization for job training programmes)

In some organizations a professionalist discourse was more dominant in their overall functioning. Based on the literature, we assumed that these organizations would be most likely to approach diversity from a colour-blind perspective. One respondent, a director of a service organization for self-help groups, stated that because their mission is to offer the right support

and advice to self-help groups, it is important that employees simply have the right expertise. He argued that as an organization, there is no need to explicitly aim to increase diversity nor strive for homogeneity. Diversity is rarely an issue and barely mentioned. When 'diversity' is mentioned, it is not associated with specific sociodemographic characteristics but rather with 'diversity of clientele' (in this case the self-help groups).

> "We must work with the clients we have. If our client doesn't make a point out of it or makes diversity only their fifth or sixth objective, then we listen to them. […] Perhaps we are also not enough … familiarized to give our clients the right approach. […] It's a lack of methodology or approach. Not the lack of…views… or the idea that we should change the way we think in some way." (Director, umbrella organization for self-help organizations)

Moreover, as they prioritise professionalism and expertise, organizations can find themselves in an unsuitable position to tackle issues of diversity, even if they strive to do so. As the respondent states, their lack of expertise and knowledge in communicating about such matters is one of the reasons why they make no mention of diversity (work). The respondent however continues by expressing a clear conviction that they are not against diversity or wishing to reinforce homogeneity.

*A grassroots discourse: diversity as a reflection of the moral values of the organization*

In the literature review, we suggested that organizations in which a grassroots discourse is dominant will most likely have a fairness perspective on diversity. While many leaders in our study draw upon a fairness perspective, stating that '*organizations should be a reflection of society'*, some respondents explicitly link the adoption of this perspective to their grassroots values. When asked why organizational diversity is important, one respondent replied that "we will be working for an increasingly smaller group of people, which would simply be wrong because that is not a reflection of the society in which we live."

The central notion of a grassroots discourse is that the organization should be a domination-free, consensus seeking space and that actors are fully informed about all issues, participate in decisions, know why a particular decision has been made, and, consequently, fully support the organization's course of action (Maier and Meyer, 2011). It was clear that the leaders we interviewed who explicitly lean towards a grassroots discourse view institutional recognition and a unanimous acknowledgment of diversity as of primary importance before taking any action towards diversity work.

> "Our team follows us in how we think about diversity. That's very clear. It would be worse if we were to say that that is not the case […] [Volunteers] also have an input on policy and thus prior to writing the policy plan, they were also questioned, and it was clear that they think diversity is important as well. And diversity in its broad sense, not only ethnic cultural, but also gender, socioeconomic, city-countryside…" (Director, youth recreation organization)

While many of the leaders in our study see the need to take action regarding existing diversity, we observed that organizations with a predominantly grassroots discourse rarely do diversity work. One possible explanation is that many of these organizations have homogeneous target groups and staff, mostly middle class and belonging to a white ethnic majority. In the view of a director of a grassroots youth recreation organization, this was one of the reasons why there is no urgency to do diversity work. The organization, once established as a grassroots organization striving for class equality by offering recreation to *all* children, has become "a predominantly white middle-class organization' and one 'that has no trouble finding participants and volunteers.' This is because 'there is not really a need to diversify. […] at least not the need in terms of survival."

But even leaders in organizations with a predominantly grassroots discourse, and with target groups that were not homogenous, showed no intention of carrying out diversity work and instead draw upon grassroots values when considering potential employees. This finding resonates with Walker & Stepick's (2014) study, which shows that because grassroots organizations are often focused on developing collective identities and shared understandings, they often avoid the challenges and conflicts associated with efforts to create a diverse workplace. The leader of one of these organizations, which is active in development aid, refers, rather, to the importance of two required qualifications in employees: solidarity, as this is one of the principles upon which the organization was established, and a personal interest in development aid. This is further illustrated by one of our respondents, who draws upon a fairness perspective by still addressing the need for support towards minority groups, yet states that: "It's not that we are going to commit ourselves to [diversity]. You know, in job interviews, I go for quality and then… we wait to see who stands out.". By referring to the importance of quality, this respondent draws on a professionalist discourse, illustrating how organizations combine multiple discourses.

Finally, since great importance is attached to openness and people's own initiative in volunteering, there seems to be a reluctance to take any form of positive action in favour of

historically marginalized communities, or to support government incentives for diversity. As one respondent argues:

> "[…] it should be intertwined in how you look at yourself and what you want to do as an organization. If that is not the case, then it will never be possible. Not with this one-off government subsidy, because you will end up instrumentalizing it in a problematic way and only do it temporarily because it has an advantage, and that advantage is called money. No, I do not believe in that." (Director, grassroots organization for world cinema)

Thus, as mentioned, government incentives stand in stark contrast to grassroots principles, since they are a way of instrumentalizing diversity and since they hamper the 'organic' development of diversity.

*A domestic discourse: diversity to ensure accessibility for the target group*

In the previous overview we hypothesized that organizations with a domestic discourse could either become more homogeneous or could adopt an access perspective. It was clear that most respondents invoked an access perspective when discussing diversity. An argument often mentioned by leaders in favour of 'pursuing' diversity is that it can provide better access to the target group. For example, one respondent states that: "bringing in diversity is important for beneficiaries as it familiarizes them with the diversity in society". Ethnic cultural diversity is thus seen as an instrument for reaching specific organizational goals. For example, a coordinator clarifies why a member of a religious minority group fits best with the service group for young refugees. She then explains that the employee's more practical experience is less suited to other residential groups in the facility.

> "In Group 8 [residential group for unaccompanied refugee minors] it can be extra useful if you have someone who is Muslim and who… understands the teenagers more. The woman who works there now has a different cultural background, she is also a little bit older, more mature and that really fits with that group. […] For that specific group, she was okay, but she isn't flexible enough to deploy in other groups, but I hired her because of Group 8." (Coordinator and HR employee, special youth care centre)

Our assumption was further confirmed when organizations with a domestic discourse recognized diversity as a strategy that provides access to a diverse target group and brings value to the organizational programme. In some cases, even, the viability of the organizations depends on whether diversity is present. This is because the target group plays a pivotal role, be they

families, children, youth, or – in the case of umbrella organizations – other organizations. When referring to diversity, organizations predominantly mention ethnic minorities because their target group is largely made up of vulnerable and historically marginalized communities. As a result, some organizations have established a diverse representation of employees over the years and consider workplace diversity as a given, meaning that diversity is visible and serves the functioning of the organization. The leader of an organization offering social welfare assistance, for example, stated the importance of making certain communities feel recognized, improving access to them and their welfare questions by focusing on matching counsellors with members of the target group based on sociodemographic characteristics.

Organizations in our study with a domestic discourse which have not yet established diverse representation all face exogenous forces pressing them to confront the whiteness of their organization. This was especially the case for youth organizations. This tension causes leaders to actively recruit diverse employees, so as not to "lose any credibility as an organization". Similarly, another youth organization states: "It is definitely important to show the visibility of a diverse team because our target group is diverse. That is really a must. It would be a disgrace if we were to be a completely white organization."

Also significant, albeit less frequently mentioned, is the importance of ethnic minority employees for contributing knowledge and frames of reference on how to critically examine and question the organization and its way of operating. Here, organization 'screening' by 'experience experts' such as ethnic minorities is considered valuable, as are narratives on experienced racism. In other words, ethnic minorities are called upon to share their knowledge and experiences, thus enabling the organization to thrive and retain credibility.

Despite the need to establish a 'fit' with beneficiaries from minority groups, diversity can also bring tensions as 'differences' may be hard to fit into the organization, thus undermining its domestic 'ambitions'. In other words, while the arrival of diversity is required to maintain a 'fit' with beneficiaries from minority groups, it also potentially endangers a fit with other employees. One organizational leader talks about how cultural differences result in additional effort and commitment because there is no shared framework. This requires him to put in additional effort, which, according to the respondent, is received with great gratitude. Here, diversity clearly becomes a commitment, which according to Ahmed (2009) often requires those who embody diversity to express gratitude. The respondent continues that despite this difficulty and the doubts that accompany it, it is considered important to learn from it and to be able to gain credibility as an organization and within their target group.

> "I have a colleague with a… with a different cultural background and I notice… It requires more attention. [...] When someone comes in here and has not mastered the framework we work in, that takes work. That's the case for everyone, but it requires more attention or more effort. It requires an open, honest attitude from me… and a quick feedback, to keep a close eye on things. That's always received with great gratitude and an incredible openness to learn, to grow… a lot more than with other colleagues." (Coordinator, umbrella organization for youth work)

Our results furthermore show that leaders in organizations whose workings lean more towards a civic discourse can also draw upon an access perspective, although combined with another perspective. One respondent, for example, describes the value of ethnic minorities in accessing a more diverse target group within their community work, referring primarily to their network and language skills.

> "You can feel that organizations who have the goal to create a link with the local community, cannot always do this very easy. But we have an enormous asset and that is Hamza. He knows so many people. Like I said, he grew up there, speaks Arabic, knows a lot of people. For many people he is the organization […]. You can see that certain things… certain questions can be asked easier to someone who embodies trust, has the same roots, the same background." (Director, community work organization)

However, the respondent goes on to refer to the importance of societal power dynamics, stating that "it is also important from a societal point of view to offer people with a migration background - who in any case have less opportunities on the labour market – to create opportunities… or to be able to offer some sort of counterweight."

Another leader, however, based on her own experiences as a minority group member, condemns this access perspective and insists on professionalization of her employees in the ability to expand knowledge on both workplace diversity and target group diversity. In doing so, she clearly draws upon a learning and integration perspective.

> "Ethnic cultural minorities should be able to get other roles than just those who work for the same target group, or those who operate as translators or cultural interpreters. I think that is really import in our organization. Colleagues should not only be able to approach me to give advice about a certain 'cultural' approach. Everybody has to be able to offer counselling because they are professionals. In that sense, diversity should be a common thread throughout the whole organization. In trajectories and also conversations about socially relevant topics. If we discuss things and shape our opinions about them, we can learn a lot from each other and do things that allow us to connect. I always participate in fasting during Ramadan for example and I am not ashamed to admit that. Colleagues

> handle that with a lot of respect and also take it into account. I think that is important for me as a human being and for my colleagues as well." (Director, crisis intervention organization)

The latter quotation shows how an individual leader's own experience as a member of an ethnic minority, in an organization whose governance predominantly aligns with a domestic discourse, can influence how diversity is approached. This finding resonates with Fulton et al. (2019), who show that organizational leaders from marginalized status groups spend more efforts in addressing social equality and diversity. Indeed, the director explicitly dismisses the access perspective on diversity as, for her, it does not do justice to the professionalism of every employee. Moreover, also drawing upon professional standards, she states that every employee should be able to interact with different clients.

*A civic discourse: creating, integrating, and learning structural social change*

We have just referred to an integration and learning perspective in an organization led by an ethnic minority member. Our theoretical assumption is that organizations with a civic discourse are most likely to draw upon this perspective. One of our respondents establishes a clear connection between the civic discourse and a learning and integration perspective when arguing that: "diversity is about making the city and its organizations with the people that live there and use it. To do things together with everyone who is a part of it, with who you are as a person and all your beliefs." (Director, community and advocacy organization)

Given its focus on unequal power relations in and outside of the organization, a civic discourse adopts a macrostructural perspective to diversity. Since leaders play an important advocacy role in alleviating poverty, ethnic inequalities, community organizing etc., they may tackle their own organizational diversity in a way that aligns with their mission. A director of a local outreach and advocacy organization explains how creating a diverse workforce at all levels of the organization, and making sure that minority group members raise any issues, is necessary to change the power relations and truly make diversity an integral part of the organization.

A civic discourse also refers to the insistence of the organization on the use of organizational policies which highlight members' rules, rights, and responsibilities. This, as well as the importance of the composition of decision-making bodies, can result in a clearly defined and unwavering diversity policy. While word-of-mouth communication strategies are welcomed, to make the organization known in different communities, formal recruiting

strategies are also used (e.g. through a website). Unlike a grassroots discourse, a civic discourse involves a great deal of support for positive action and government incentives to ensure representation. One organization, for example, monitors its recruitment process and does not invite applicants for an interview until applications have been received from minority group members.

However, as attention to power relations is deeply entrenched in these organizations, diversity work is not necessarily reflected in or backed up by a diversity policy. Often, diversity work is seen as part of the organizational mission, which is not only related to, for example, offering welfare assistance, but also to alleviating structural inequalities that ethnic minorities face on the labour market.

> "In the beginning I was really focusing on the structural dimension of racism and discrimination because I really wanted to tackle that and not so much microaggressions in the organization. It was less frequently mentioned, described and discussed. A lot of the employees who deal with those aggressions tell me they should be able to handle that because it's their job, but no. You take it home with you and it's hurtful so we're going to talk about it. I think that's progress, but sometimes it's also heavy… even though I'm not the victim of racism, but the idea that some people encounter those aggressions in our organization is really difficult for me." (Director, community and advocacy work organization)

In addition to achieving representation through active selection of minorities, the leader of an organization with a predominantly civic discourse also refers to the use of fictional cases during job interviews to assess how candidates think about (reverse) racism, gender and power relations. Furthermore, some respondents also stress a commitment to proactively counter micro-aggressions that employees might experience in the workplace.

## Conclusion

Existing literature on diversity shows that conceptions of diversity and proposed actions for social change are still predominantly grounded in root images of 'the firm' (Janssens and Zanoni, 2021). In this chapter our aim was to better understand diversity discourses and practices in various nonprofit organizations. While many studies point to the prevailing influence and detrimental effects of a business discourse in nonprofit organizations, our research aims to conceptualize diversity beyond merely managerialist understandings of organizational governance, and to show how the organization's perspective of diversity can be shaped by a wider variety of discourses on governance of nonprofit organizations.

The different discourses outlined show how nonprofits make decisions, communicate, and manage personnel, and allow us to grasp more adequately how and why organizations adopt a certain perspective on diversity, and consequently how inequalities can be (re)produced in these organizations. Leaders in organizations with a professionalist discourse, for example, focus primarily on qualifications and thereby reinforce a discourse of colour-blindness and meritocracy. We see however that qualifications are perceived in a broad sense, referring to formal education, language skills, but also to less tangible criteria such as commitment, passion, the ability to understand the organization's 'framework' and identification with the social mission of the organization. On the other hand, leaders in organizations with a grassroots discourse draw upon grassroots principles and perceive fairness as central to the diversity debate. This discourse emphasizes autonomy and the need for diversity to emerge 'organically', rather than being imposed by external actors such as governments. As a result, the responsibility for integrating diversity is located outside of the organization. Moreover, these grassroots values do not necessary align with more equality, as diversity can (unconsciously) be merely tolerated and accepted, decoupled from any form of action. In this way, organizational leaders can channel 'progressive' diversity claims into a fixed organizational context, thereby strengthening dominant power positions (Swan and Fox, 2010; Tatli, 2010).

A third discourse discussed is the domestic discourse, which was in many instances linked by leaders to an access perspective. While historically marginalized communities are often a primary target group, our research shows that members of these communities are at the same time being used for the benefit of the organization's social mission, often contradicting their moral arguments by imposing a normative assessment framework. Diversity is considered valuable as long as it contributes to either the organizational program, internal organizing activities or acts as a tool for carrying out diversity work. In some instances, diversity is referred to by leaders as a tool enabling organizations to reinvent themselves. Hence, in many cases these organizations act as an 'enabler' and take a positive stance towards diversity as long as it meets their requirements and fits within their framework. Our study also showed how in some cases tensions can arise, as organizations need difference, but do not see it as fitting with their own structures.

While the organizational discourse is an important factor in how diversity is perceived in an organization, our research also shows that individual leaders' experiences as minority ethnic group members can be decisive for the organizations' approach (see also Lee, 2022). This is not surprising as diversity is often associated with voluntarism, meaning that the work it does in organizations depends on who gets to define the term and for whom (Ahmed, 2007a).

This voluntarism can be seen as the consequence of a deregulation of diversity. In our study, no policy regulations or criteria are imposed to nonprofit organizations that enforce them to establish workforce diversity. As a result, leaders adopt diversity initiatives that they see as fitting with their own beliefs and within the terms of accountability. For example, in nonprofit organizations with a civic discourse, we find that leaders who have a strong affinity with diversity-related topics because of their own ethnic cultural background, or leaders in organizations in which inclusion of historically marginalized communities and anti-racism lie at the heart of the social mission, are more likely to draw upon an integration and learning perspective. In sum, the fact of having an affinity or advocacy role in alleviating poverty, ethnic inequalities, community organizing etc., enables leaders to tackle their own organizational diversity in a way that aligns with their mission.

*Limitations and further research*

Our research leaves crucial challenges on diversity open for inquiry. Firstly, the context for our research is welfare and sociocultural organizations in Flanders, Belgium. It is safe to say that the nonprofit sector is a complex range of different organizations, all interacting with various actors such as beneficiaries, group members, volunteers, staff, boards, private or public funders, in different (inter)national and regional contexts (Anheier, Lang, & Toepler, 2019; Keevers, Treleaven, Sykes, & Darcy, 2012). Consequently, future research examining how organizations define diversity and how this is intertwined with various (f)actors would be highly valuable. Secondly, more research is needed on the perspectives of multiple actors such as (ethnic minority) employees in these organizations, in order to adequately grasp *how* workplace diversity comes into being in the everyday context of nonprofit organizations. We believe that employees in organizations, depending on their position, may hold different discourses about diversity (Pasche & Santos, 2013). Further studies could focus on how organizations deal with the presence of discourses that may cause conflict or competition among different internal stakeholders. Finally, if the nonprofit sector is to fulfil its emancipatory role, research on diversity must examine and broaden its knowledge of the power and historical context in which nonprofit organizations operate and how this effects different individuals and groups.

# Chapter 2
# Understanding diversity in nonprofit organizations: an institutional logics perspective

## Introduction

This chapter examines how the growing diversity in society and the salience of identity categories such as gender, ethnicity, sexuality, or disability affects how nonprofit organizations establish workforce diversity and diversity practices. To reduce organizational complexity caused by processes of incorporating diversity, organizations respond and 'accommodate' by doing diversity work, i.e. offering training and mentoring programs, implementing diversity within HR procedures, promoting multicultural regulations, setting non-discriminatory guidelines and policies, etc. (Koellen, 2021; Ahmed and Swan, 2006; Janssens and Zanoni, 2014). However, despite extensive reports on diversity practices and their effects on the performance of nonprofits, research remains somewhat divided as to why and how nonprofit organizations adopt diversity practices (Tomlinson and Schwabenland, 2010; Walker and Stepick, 2014; Weisinger et al., 2016).

Drawing on the theory of institutional logics, this chapter aims to contribute to a better understanding of why and how nonprofit organizations incorporate and accommodate the growing diversity in their workplace. Institutional logics are symbols and practices, along with their underlying assumptions, values, and beliefs that are available to organizations and individuals and driven forward by established institutional orders such as family, community, religion, market, state, profession, and corporations (Thornton and Ocasio, 2008; Thornton et al., 2012). Rather than focusing on organizational-level diversity practices, the institutional logics perspective enables a focus on field-level logics that influence how various organizations are introduced, respond, and accommodate to growing differences. We believe the institutional logics perspective is particularly important as it allows us to understand how organizations interact with their broader societal environment, which grants us insight into the diversity practices they choose, how they modify their organizational structure to accommodate to diversity as well as how this spaces the identities of employees (van der Voet, 2014).

This chapter more specifically puts forward the following questions: (i) what are the institutional logics through which nonprofit organizations incorporate diversity in their

workplace, (ii) what types of organizational structures result from the particular ways through which nonprofits try to incorporate diversity in their workplace, and (iii) how do employees give meaning to and construct their identity with regard to the established institutional logic(s)? We believe that answering these questions offers important contributions to both the literature on diversity in nonprofits and to the institutional logics approach. Firstly, we contribute to debates on workplace diversity by using the institutional logics perspective. This approach allows us to explain the interaction between the broader societal context in which organizations are embedded and how their (internal) organizational structures are changed through attempts to respond and accommodate to societal diversity. More specifically, by putting workplace diversity squarely within the broader institutional context, we are able to highlight how diversity as a societal phenomenon interacts with the internal dynamics of nonprofit organizations as well as the opportunities for organizational agency and change expressed in their organizational structure. Moreover, it allows us to understand how actor identities and material practices are co-implicated (Klein, 2015). Understanding the broader institutional field, therefore, contributes to a better understanding of the multiple ways diversity is represented in organizations.

Secondly, nonprofit organizations draw on various institutional logics to give meaning and conform to their external environment (Knutsen, 2012). By developing a better understanding of how organizations incorporate expectations from their environment with regard to diversity, we also aim to contribute to the literature on institutional logics. While research suggests that nonprofits incorporate novel expectations by changing their organizational structures (Skelcher and Smith, 2015), it is unclear how this happens in the case of workplace diversity. We suggest that the institutional logic(s) with which nonprofit organizations are confronted, strongly shape their diversity practices and resulting organizational structures, thus providing an understanding of the connection between institutional logics and the organizational forms that regulate workplace diversity.

Based on two case studies in the northern region of Belgium, Flanders, our study brings into sight the institutional logics through which diversity 'enters' welfare organizations, affecting organizational structures and actor identities in a specific way. More in particular, our research shows that studying diversity from the perspective of institutional logics allows for a better understanding of how organizational structures are modified to accommodate to diversity in the workplace. In the following sections, we review the theoretical literature on institutional logics followed by a description of our research design and an overview of the analysis of two

hybrids informed by Skelcher and Smith's (2015) typology. We conclude with an overview of our results and suggestions for further inquiry.

## Workplace diversity and the institutional logics approach

To comprehend how diversity as a societal phenomenon affects nonprofit organizations in their everyday practices and organizational structure, it is useful to understand the embedded rationalities that guide how organizations respond to their external environments. The institutional logics approach was first introduced by Friedland and Alford (1991) as a meta-theory to better understand individual and organizational behaviour and to capture the rationalities that govern and shape behaviour in and of organizations. It argues that every society is made out of different societal-level institutional orders, each with its central field-level logic. In a Western society, these orders and their logics comprise of the family, community, religion, state, market, profession, and corporation (Thornton and Ocasio, 2008). Institutional logics are defined as the range of cultural symbols, practices, values and beliefs that *"condition [organizations'] choices for sensemaking, the vocabulary they use to motivate action, and their sense of self and identity. The principles, practices, and symbols of each institutional order differentially shape how reasoning takes place and how rationality is perceived and experienced."* (Thornton et al., 2012: 2). As such, institutional logics enable us to understand how organizations are influenced by their external environment in an interinstitutional system as well as how they give meaning to their external environment by pursuing distinct objectives and engage in particular activities that stem from a certain logic (Thornton and Ocasio, 2008; Beaton et al., 2021).

While diversity is not an entirely new phenomenon, its introduction to organizations and thus its way of shaping institutional logics is relatively new. Much of what is known about how organizations interact with diversity in the workforce is related to 'diversity management' in firms (Janssens and Zanoni, 2021). While there has been considerable attention to how organizations adapt to diversity as an external reality, little is known through which institutional logics diversity is introduced into the field of nonprofit organizations and how this relates to how organizations and actors make sense of diversity in their environments. In addition, while this might be the case for some nonprofit organizations, diversity management does not capture all possible organizational responses (see e.g., Elloukmani et al., 2023), nor why organizations choose to respond in one way or another.

We, therefore, argue that 'diversity work' in organizations should be explained by analyzing the different institutional logic(s) that organizations draw upon to guide how

practices, attitudes, and beliefs on diversity are implemented and managed. Unlike the private or public sector, which often have uniform sets of institutional logics, the nonprofit sector draws on a multitude of logics. Knutsen (2012) shows how the nonprofit sector enacts institutional logics of democracy, family, religion, and professions arguing that "multiple institutional logics can be embodied and practiced by different types of nonprofit organizations within the nonprofit sector" (Knutsen, 2012: 1007). While each of these logics have their source of authority, legitimacy and identity, Thornton et al. (2012) underline that social interactions within the family, religion, and community are especially oriented towards internal/emotional considerations, whereas the market, profession, state, and corporations are oriented towards its external/material environment (Beagles, 2022). In his study, Beagles (2022) shows how this orientation impacts organizations' membership criteria; internal/emotionally oriented logics are associated with more inclusive commitment-oriented criteria compared to external/material where membership is more tied to organizational capacities. These criteria suggest important implications for workforce diversity as well as the possibility of power dynamics playing out differently within different logics (Beagles, 2022).

### The (plural) institutional logics approach and workplace diversity

Building on the institutional logics approach, Skelcher and Smith (2015) posit that nonprofit organizations should be perceived as sites for contestation where plural institutional logics lead to the formation of complex organizational structures. As the nonprofit sector is characterized as multidimensional and embodying a wide range of institutional logics, organizations within this sector are considered hybrids who adhere and combine multiple logics in various ways (Knutsen, 2012; Skelcher & Smith, 2015). Various scholars have provided evidence of how changes in institutional orders and their logics influence the governance structure of organizations (see e.g., Beaton et al., 2021). Considerable attention in this field has particularly been paid to how nonprofits are conflicted with establishing and maintaining a logic that addresses social needs and promotes trust and community values (community logic) while at the same time adhering to the growing pressures to pursue a market logic that centres around commercial needs for more profit or a greater market share (Pache and Santos, 2010; Noordegraaf, 2015; Spitzmueller, 2016). At the same time, many nonprofits are increasingly advancing employees' qualification levels by placing a stronger emphasis on specialized skills and formal educational credentials, thereby putting forward a professional logic (Maier et al., 2016; Hwang and Powell, 2009). Depending on how nonprofit organizations combine these logics in their organizational structures different organizational structures emerge. These

structures, according to Skelcher and Smith (2015), can be classified into four types: *segmented* (different logics are compartmentalized within the organization), *segregated* (different logics are compartmentalized into separate organizations), *assimilated* (core logic adopts some practices and symbols of a new logic) and *blended* (incorporation of elements of existing logics into new logic).

When looking solely at organization-level diversity practices and the logic through which they are introduced, research reveals how different organizational structures may emerge. In their study, Anderson-Gough et al. (2022) for example, have analyzed how professional service firms respond when diversity is introduced through a state logic, in this case, the diversity legislation of the 2010 Equality Act in the UK. They observe both blending and segregation of institutional logics within these hybridized organizations, even arguing for the existence of an institutional logic of diversity. Introducing workplace diversity, however, may also lead to an assimilated organizational structure. Many critical scholars have shown the performative nature of diversity in organizations: whereas the expectation of workplace diversity is reflected in inclusive organizational procedures (e.g., recruitment), symbols (e.g., organizational image), and languages, their day-to-day practice continue to operate in line with established institutional logics (Ahmed, 2007a; Ahmed and Swan, 2006; Puwar, 2004). However, diversity programs can also be 'blended' with existing organizations' professional and/or community practices through the valuing of multiple competencies and recognition of multiple identities (e.g. Janssens and Zanoni, 2014; Meyers and Vallas, 2016).

There is a profusion of research on diversity ranging from a global perspective on diversity (Özbilgin, 2019; Syed and Özbilgin, 2009) to sector and field-specific implications addressing internal processes of organizations (Janssens and Zanoni, 2021), to the identity processes of employees (Holck et al., 2016). Rather than focusing on field-level understandings of diversity, this research highlights the various logics that inform nonprofit organizations and are shaped by them. Drawing on this framework allows us to analyze the dynamics of organizations within the broader societal context by better understanding the institutional logics through which diversity becomes a reality in organizations as well as how this affects organizational structures and actor identities. Especially with regard to the latter, we hope to offer to the nonprofit literature by developing a better understanding of how organizations, as carriers of institutional logics, incorporate expectations from their environment with regard to collective identifications in their workforce caused by processes of growing diversity.

# Method

This chapter attempts to examine the dynamics of workplace diversity in nonprofit organizations through an institutional logics perspective. We have conducted qualitative research in two welfare organizations situated in the largest metropolitan area in Flanders (the northern region of Belgium). The city displays a high degree of ethnic and religious diversity and is characterized by a majority-minority demographic distribution.

*Case selection*

Organizations are selected from a previous in-depth analysis of diversity discourses of twenty-five leaders in this region. For further inquiry, we selected two case studies. Following Skelcher and Smith's (2015) classifications of organizational hybrid structures, our empirical work has shown that we can classify these cases as segmented (workplace diversity compartmentalized within only one part of the organization) and blended (workplace diversity incorporated into the existing structure and practices of the organization) organizations. We believe that by looking at these range of contrasting cases, possibilities emerge to better understand how differences are shaped in single-case organizational settings (Meyer, 2001; Holck, 2018b). However, these organizations are very similar in size, location, gender, and ethnic diversity (see Table 4) as well as how they are regarded by other organizations in the sector as exemplary for their diversity program, making them suitable to provide a better answer to our research questions (Heale and Twycross, 2018).

*Data collection*

Organization A (OA) is an organization that 'accompanies socially vulnerable families and young adults who are in a precarious living situation, regardless of their ethnic cultural background'. OA consists of groups that are differentiated based on target groups' age categories. They provide a daycentre for children and teenagers as well as individual contextual counseling for young adults and families. Two decades ago, the organizations introduced a diversity program through the establishment of a daycentre for Muslim families. Organization B (OB) aims at 'tackling the unequal structures of our society which makes people vulnerable and creates exclusion'. They address this mission by offering community service as well as engaging in community development. This means offering low-threshold community service (e.g., administrative aid) and creating participatory project work with citizens (e.g., advocacy work) to work on both practical and sustainable solutions. OB introduced a diversity program

into its organization around the same period as OA. Diversity has become a key cornerstone of the organizations' image and practices ever since.

In total 40 semi-structured in-depth interviews (23 and 17 respectively, see Table 5 and Table 6) with employees and two directors were conducted between February 2022 and May 2022. Interviews were initiated with a short statement of the research goal that was framed as gaining a better understanding of diversity in the welfare sector, after which respondents were guaranteed anonymity by signing in on an ethical clearance agreement. Conversations ranged from 30 minutes to nearly two hours and were conducted in Dutch. They mostly took place in a private room in the organization, only three employees preferred to talk in a quiet place outside. Participants were both long-term and short-term employees (ranging between one-year employment to over twenty years). Transcripts were provided by a student and all names are pseudonymized. When discussing diversity, research participants mostly refer to employees' ethnic and/or religious background, signifying that mainly ethnic and religious identity dimensions pose a significant predictor of differences (see also De Cleen et al., 2017).

*Data analysis*

In going into depth into the two selected cases, we first gathered information on the organizations' subgroups in different neighborhoods, employee mobilization groups, as well as socio-demographic data of employees that were made available to the authors by the organizations. This study made use of narrative analysis and drew attention to how differences are relevant and meaningful to employees in their workplace. In drawing upon these narratives, employees were able to represent their identities and surroundings which also allowed them to organize their experiences into meaningful episodes (Fraser, 2004). Furthermore, a narrative analysis draws upon processes of (inter)subjective reasoning as being socially constructed in a specific and dynamic context, and hence applies the concept of thick description as understood by Geertz (2008).

In our coding processes, we used feedback loops while moving back and forth between institutional logics approach and concepts and the results of the interviews. From these results, we first inductively mapped general themes for the cases such as 'defining diversity' 'cultural identity' 'collective identity' 'racism and discrimination' 'strategies to fit it', 'organizational policy', and 'organizational structure'. After this, we looked at these topics more in-depth for each case and refined the coding process after we combined the cases again to find possible similarities and differences. During this last phase, we drew up more on theoretical frameworks

of diversity (management), institutional logics and the theory of hybrids to better understand the organizational processes we encountered in the interviews.

## Results

In the following section of this chapter, we first discuss through which institutional logics the two selected organizations introduce diversity in the workplace. Secondly, we look at the consequences of introducing these logics and develop a fuller account of how this affects organizational structures as well as how these changes affect actor identities.

### Organization A

*Introducing diversity through a professional institutional logic*

Since the beginning of the century, the growing diversity of ethnic minorities and their disadvantaged social position has increasingly challenged welfare organizations in providing tailored services for this group (Hajighasemi, 2021). One of the welfare organizations responding to this need for more 'ethnically sensitive' social provision is OA. OA explicitly aims towards vulnerable families "regardless of their ethnic background", directly emphasizing the importance of taking into account ethnic diversity when providing services and support. According to the organization's diversity coordinator, their 'diversity work' is the result of their responsive stance toward the pressing social issues in ethnic communities that required a transformation of the organizations' 'conventional' professional logic:

> "At a given moment in the late '90s we realized that Moroccan[21] youth was not represented in welfare organizations. They were overrepresented in juvenile prison […] and we decided to be responsive and wonder 'well why are they underrepresented in welfare counseling and why do they immediately end up in the most radical interventions?'. […] We addressed the Moroccan community and asked them what they needed, what would give them trust in us, and allowed them to discuss the issues they have with parenting. And well… the conclusion was that they did not feel represented and understood. We realized there was a need for recognizability." (Rita, diversity coordinator)

[21] People of Moroccan origin constitute the largest non-EU migrant group in Belgium. As of 2022, they make up 10.7% of the Belgian population (STATBEL, 2022).

In other words, OA aims to develop services and support tailored to the needs of ethnic and religious minorities, i.e., group-specific services. For this reason, the organization commits to the recruitment of minority ethnic employees, thus creating 'workplace diversity'.

> "So, the recognizability of our staff is important so that they can understand each other so that clients don't have to explain what certain things mean. That's the reason we started looking for Moroccan employees. […] We see workplace diversity as a kaleidoscope that revolves around culture. It's not about the rest being less or more important, but we have a target group that requires a certain way of working." (Rita, diversity coordinator)

In highlighting the importance of recognizability and reliability to allow the organization to tailor its services to the changing social needs in its external environment, OA's diversity coordinator shows that the creation of workplace diversity in OA is predominantly motivated and guided by a professional logic. Within this logic, specialized knowledge and skills are centralized and the strategies, norms, and control mechanisms governing social interactions are oriented toward the external environment (Beagles, 2022; Thornton et al., 2012). In the case of OA, this translates to diversity practices aimed at recruiting counselors with a Moroccan background who are expected to deploy their 'cultural' skills to accommodate the needs of vulnerable ethnic and religious minorities that fall through the 'welfare net'.

While OA's new diversity program was considered innovative as it finally met ethnic minority clients' needs that were previously not recognized, it also had an experimental character as it was expected to generate a broader diversity program that would be the blueprint for the entirety of the organization. This means that OA no longer only offers target group-specific social provision towards ethnic and religious minorities, but now centralizes broader representational diversity throughout the organizations and explicitly requires all employees to deploy their identity in service provision to build a sustainable relationship with clients:

> "We have an employment policy that when we hire people, we ask them if they are willing to explain themselves to clients. If you wear a headscarf, and a client asks you a question about that, you should be able to answer them. Just like people should be able to ask me questions and I should be able to provide them with assistance. […] As welfare agents, we work with our identity and if a client has a question about that, we should be able to answer that. A welfare agent can be leverage to the counseling process and make things easier." (Rita, diversity coordinator)

By asking employees to 'work with their identity', the organization seeks to deploy a community institutional logic that aims for 'emotional connection' between professionals and

clients, while at the same time associating this deployment of identity in professional work as part of the 'quality of the craft' – hence a blending of community and professional logics to accommodate diversity in the organization (Skelcher & Smith, 2015). Our findings show however that in practice the organization mainly holds expectations for minority ethnic and religious employees to adhere to this innovation in the professional logic. Morover, this newly introduced approach that blends professional and community logics to guide the organizations' workforce diversity is sometimes contested by the rest of the organization where it is not always applied or even known by employees. For instance, several employees whom we contacted replied that they didn't know much about diversity and preferred not to do an interview. The organization's diversity coordinator also recalls a conversation with a colleague: […] "she was telling me that diversity is much more than culture and that she doesn't understand why we focus so much on that. I explained to her diversity is indeed much more, but that we have a target group that requires a certain way of working. And then she tells me 'oh, I didn't know that'. I nearly fell off my chair!"

On the other hand, we recounted employees who were aware of the organization's new approach to diversity within the organization but choose not to deploy their identities when facing their target group. These respondents explicitly resist the integration of 'identity deployment' practices in the provision of services and support. Ellen for example, who grew up in a vulnerable family context and has been familiar with welfare counseling since she was a child, does not want to share her personal life or past with clients or colleagues.

> "It's not something you tell people when you come in. I think if I would tell clients they would… give me some sort of recognition, that I have experience. But it gets appropriated to you very quickly… You'll become that one person who has experience with… No, I don't want that. I don't want to use that. No. I'm here because I studied for it, because I'm interested in it and I'm good at what I do…"

The same goes for Katy, a queer woman who stresses that she does not want to feel different than other people.

> "I don't feel comfortable enough to organize something for our clients because I'm a lesbian woman. Sometimes colleagues ask me to do that and I feel like I have to present myself as a lesbian woman. No! If there is a moment at which that topic is really relevant and out there, I would do something. Does that mean I'm sweeping it under the carpet? I don't know. I just don't feel different than other people… not at all. I just really want to normalize my life."

These examples show how the driving force of OA's diversity program mainly lies in a professional logic through which they provide services, but attempts to innovate this professional logic by blending it with elements of a community logic lead to resistance within the organization. While the leader and diversity coordinator of OA aspire to implement a broader diversity program where all employees deploy their identity to facilitate service provision, practice shows that this new professional approach is mostly imposed on employees with an ethnic and religious minority background and tends to be resisted by employees with an ethnic majority background because this approach does not concur with their (interpretation of) a professional logic. In the following section, we look into how OA introduces a professional logic into its organizational structure and how this shapes employees' identities.

*Segmented hybrid: compartmentalizing workplace diversity*

In aiming to access a broader, ethnically diverse target group, OA started two decades ago with the establishment of a distinct daycentre for Moroccan families and children. Given the growing diversity in terms of ethnicities and nationalities, the daycentre has now chosen to further broaden its target group to Muslim communities in general. To this day, counselors in this daycentre are all ethnic minority employees of Moroccan descent.

> "It's a categorical daycentre where employees know and properly assess client's language, cultural habits, and practices. So, it's about language and supporting them but also about delving into people's moral perspectives versus the scientific, empirical Western model of looking at psychiatry, education, etc. We want people who empathize with how Muslim families – sometimes very traditional and conservative families – understand those things." (Mohamed, counselor daycentre for Muslim children)

With the establishment of a separate daycentre for Muslim families, OA has integrated a distinct substructure in the organization specifically aimed at targeting ethnic and religious minorities. In doing so, the organization promotes a compartmentalized structuration as a means to professionalize the organization in reaching and serving a broader, ethnically diverse target group. Following Skelcher and Smith's (2015) theorization of hybrids, we recognize thOA has developed a segmented hybrid, in which a different professional logic – one tentatively blended with a community logic in which cultural and religious identities are deployed to create emotional connection with the target group – is applied in the daycentre for Muslim families, while the conventional professional logic still applies everywhere else in OA. Even though the ultimate goal of OA lies in forging a blended hybrid where integration of workplace diversity

is embedded and adapted in their extant professional logic, the provision of target group-specific services is in practice predominantly centred on the employability of ethnic and religious minority employees. This has important consequences for how employees' identities are shaped. While our results earlier revealed that not all employees OA are aware of the organization's diversity program, we do find that especially ethnic minority employees are highly aware of OA's diversity program and express gratitude and pride to be employed at the organization.

> "[OA] is doing a lot. So yeah… I'm proud that I can be a part of that… I feel like the organization is diverse and that people from different origins get the opportunity to function as full members." (Samir, counselor Muslim daycentre)

One possible explanation for this awareness encountered among ethnic minority respondents is the exceptional and relatively high presence of ethnic diversity in OA and its tolerant policy towards employees taking up Islamic holidays, wearing the headscarf, etc. Compared to most Flemish nonprofits, the organization is one of few where ethnic and religious minorities can express their identity overtly (Laoukili et al., 2019), leading to heightened awareness and gratitude. Khadija for example, shares how she was pleasantly surprised when she started working for OA considering her previous experiences as a Muslim woman facing racism and difficulties in the labour market.

> "My negative experience growing up in this city was that people don't have much confidence in people with a different ethnic background. Maybe you would get the job, but not as a superior. I've seen people I know get bullied out of their job because they couldn't stand them being an ethnic minority and being their superior. Those are my experiences. I'm in my forties now and I can tell you there are many stories. If you come into this organization where people put their trust in a Moroccan man as a team coordinator… I was like wow! It was so weird to me…" (Khadija, counselor)

For some employees with a migrant background, this blending of a professional and community creates a commitment to OA, because they feel their community values are recognized and trust the organization. However, other (ethnic majority) employees showed great resistance and critique towards the organizations' diversity program and its inclusion of aspects of community logic in the existing professional approach. Many of them especially directed their critique toward the daycentre for Muslim children, stating that this way of working perpetuates inequalities. One respondent, an ethnic majority group member concludes the following:

> "It doesn't fit in what you're trying to do as an organization. They're reinforcing a 'we versus them' situation. At least be consequent and say 'we are open for everyone'. I don't understand why they constantly have to focus on diversity. Just dwelling on it alone for me is equal to sustaining inequality." (Tanja, administrative employee)

The defiance towards the organization's diversity can create unintended effects and tensions between employees. This was especially visible in the daycentre for teenagers where offering identity-based social services is prevalent. As one respondent explains, this is because for teenagers, ethnic and social identity-building is an important part of everyday life (see also Crocetti, 2017). Conversations with teenagers on issues regarding religion, sexual orientation, marriage, and abortion give rise to important questions among employees as to whether or not one's identity should be reflected in the organization. Ellen shares that she feels that someone's professional role should be separated especially from one's ethnic and religious identity because otherwise tensions will inevitably arise. In talking about Muslim and queer colleagues, she effectively argues for a segmentation of professional and community logics by saying the following:

> "I believe you have your personal framework and in addition, there is your professional role. I think that requires some tension or more conversations. You can tell me that you don't have a problem with something professionally, but at the same time, you do have judgement about the people you work with. […] I just wonder if you can really work with your queer colleague [as a Muslim]?" (Ellen, counselor)

She further continues by giving an example of a counselor wearing a headscarf, stating that as opposed to her, she as a majority ethnic counselor will be more likely to connect and gain trust with teenagers. She claims that 'wearing a headscarf' would result in the client not recognizing the social worker as a professional, again reflecting the need for segmenting different institutional logics in approaching diversity.

> "You could say that you can do something professionally, but if a teenager sees you with a headscarf, they will probably be less inclined to talk to you about certain things. But for me… I think I have different views on things and perhaps less of judgment. I won't link things to culture, but rather to what is safe for the teenager." (Ellen, counselor)

In voicing her doubts, Ellen, among others, overtly questions, challenges, and contests the organization's approach to workplace diversity. Following this, we can conclude that employees in OA disagree about what counts as a professional logic toward diversity, with quite a few dismissing a blended approach that integrates aspects of a community logic in their

professional approach by developing ethnic and culturally based service provision. This response has also been described by Pache and Santos (2010) as a strategy used by organizational members to deal with conflicting demands. As ethnic minority group members are often explicitly hired and thus expected to provide services with specific attention to the target groups' culture and religion, a defiance response ultimately leads to internal conflict in the workplace.

*Dealing with conflicting views on workplace diversity: finding a third space*

In attempting to mediate the conflicting views on their workplace diversity and the possibility that employees might feel that their identity is not recognized, the leader of OA makes explicit that the organization's strategy to deal with conflicting logics is to compromise by creating room for employees' different views on the organizations' workplace diversity. OA's diversity coordinator refers to this as finding the third space:

> "We search for what we call the third space. […] It's about finding space for us to do things together. I don't think it's just about being difficult or contrary, but perhaps… more about fearing those things that are about your identity. We don't have to sweep that under the carpet. People feel that their identity can come under pressure. So, with that in mind, we decided to offer both spaghetti with halal minced meat and minced pork for example." (Rita, diversity coordinator)

While making mild alterations to satisfy different expectations might seem like a way to allow sustainability, it can also lead to detrimental organizational complexity and harmful internal conflicts, as was mentioned by respondents had already happened (Pache and Santos, 2021). First of all, while it claims to find a third space, the organizations' actual response is more likely to be determined by the differential power of internal actors promoting the demands (Skelcher and Smith, 2015), in this case, OA's leaders. As a result, ethnic minority employees in particular claim that the organizations' workplace diversity falls short of recognizing the differential power to discuss internal conflicts. Sanah, an ethnic minority employee draws on the example of racism and what this means for different employees:

> "If I was to complain about racism, some colleagues and even our leader would tell me that they would keep their hands off such delicate matters. Even though we get along very well, it's just a topic too delicate and they don't want to get their hands burnt." (Sanah, counselor)

In conclusion, OA's renewed professional logic aims to offer leverage for social inclusion and does so with specific attention to ethnicity and religion – thus triggering and responding to a community logic in which different ethnic and cultural backgrounds are positively valued and recognized – at least in part of the organization. However, the segmented logic in the rest of organization generates tensions. On the one hand, the external orientation that is associated with the conventional professional logic leads to a lack of recognizing, identifying, and tackling internal organizational conflicts as the result of their workplace diversity. Rather, they view tensions and conflict as one-time events and aim to achieve partial conformity as a solution. However, research has offered evidence that in doing so, organizations may risk escalation of fractious debates and organizational outcomes that might lead to 'organizational paralysis' (Pache and Santos, 2010). On the other hand, the attempt to blend aspects of a community logic in the organization's professional logic equally generates tensions from those resisting the strengthened internal orientations. Overall then, we observe a failure to solve tensions between community and professional logics within the organization.

### Organization B

*Introducing diversity through a community logic*

Organization B aims at "tackling the unequal structures of our society which makes people vulnerable and creates exclusion". They address this mission through community service provision and advocacy work. In offering service provision for community members, OB predominantly highlights the importance of safety and inclusivity.

> "OB wants to tackle inequity, but for everyone. We are a community, we share a living room with people so to speak, that means that mutual trust and safety are a necessity. […] That's the most important thing really, feeling safe and being able to be who you are." (Tanja, community worker)

Several respondents OB emphasize the importance of openness, trust, safety, and comfort both towards the target group as well as for employees. Sarah, a community worker, states that 'as long as we as employees don't feel safe in a community centre, we won't be able to create a safe space for the target group.' So, to include all community members, these values are always applied both within the organization and towards target group members. By centralizing the perceptions of individuals that comprise the community, it becomes clear that the organization is predominantly guided by a community logic. Moreover, the growing diversification in the

city in which OB operates, means that services are aimed towards ethnic and religious communities. It follows that in explicitly committing to diversity in its staff, OB aims to represent the (ethnically diverse) community their serving as well as advocate for those who are typically subjected to inequity. The way diversity is introduced through a community logic is concisely described by the organization's leader:

> "Exactly because we live in this city with such a huge diversity, because we work in these vulnerable neighborhoods and want to change things, that is what makes us need all those different backgrounds. If we want to achieve our goal, we need everyone. […] I think diversity is also about choosing to deploy everyone in society according to their background. […] You make the city with the people who live there." (Anne, leader of OB)

The organization, therefore, links community values to particular forms of professional knowledge and expertise when offering service provision. OB's community logic and the values attached to it such as openness, trust, and inclusivity are also expressed by employees, who perceive this as an integral part of their work as well as who they are as an organization. Marie strikingly summarizes this as follows:

> "I think we apply a 'practice what you preach principle' on ourselves in the sense that we really want to change the outside world, structurally. It's a constant value, just like openness is a value in our organization, so is diversity. You're not going to redeem it immediately. There will always be new people with new backgrounds, new knowledge that can connect to what people before them have done. I think that's an intrinsic value. You can't let that go and it can never be finished." (Marie, community worker)

The organizations' workplace diversity is reflected in several ways. Firstly, in their recruitment process, the organization is adamant about selecting employees as generalist community workers in contrast to OA where workers are hired as 'cultural specialists' through a professional logic. While this was initially the starting point of their diversity program two decades ago, the leader of OB explains that they have changed its views over the years and have mainly done so through conversations with employees, activists, and researchers.

> "It's important for us that community workers are generalist workers. That's why we focus on a training policy. […] We recruit people as community workers and not as 'participation employees' who connect us with certain communities. That has been a big insight for us and that is something my predecessors and I have learned by talking to people. To employees, activists but also researchers." (Anne, leader of OB)

Next to selecting employees as generalist community workers who are capable to deal with a wide range of social issues, the organization also devotes great attention to hiring employees who share the organization's commitment to engaging in political advocacy in defense of community values, which reflects a community logic. The metropolitan context characterized by social and ethnic inequality in particular calls for a workplace diversity that reflects an open and proactive perspective towards structural issues of poverty and racism.

> "We give applicants cases so we can see what people think when there are instances of structural racism among employees for example. Do they take care of each other? Are people afraid to hold others accountable?" (Anne, leader of OB)

Another aspect of OB's recruitment process is aimed at empowering target group members by helping them gain professional expertise to fight for community values. One example is Zakaria, a community member who was encouraged by the organization to pursue community work. After eight years of employment, Zakaria also tells me he is now also being encouraged to finish his degree and pursue his goal of becoming a teacher.

> "I used to do a lot of volunteering and I was encouraged by one of the community workers. […] they motivated me to take all sorts of courses which I have all obtained. After that, they also encouraged me to go to college and study social work and that is how I got here. […] I'm thinking of becoming a teacher and it's nice to know that everybody, even our director, is supportive." (Zakaria, community worker)

Finally, a part of the organization's advocacy role and its commitment to training community workers is reflected in its training program on how to deal with discrimination. Every junior employee at the organization is required to follow several trainings, such as bystander training. As a result, a typical feature of the blended logic of OB is that a shared perspective on issues such as racism, diversity, and discrimination is developed which - according to Elly - leads to an '*organizational atmosphere'* where everyone can express themselves as they are:

> "We have a framework for how to react to discriminating statements. We get training for that. If something would happen, every coordinator would say: you have to react immediately. I think that is one of the reasons everybody can be who they are here. The organization creates an atmosphere in which you can be yourself and if anyone attacks you for who you are, there is a shared vision that something like that is not tolerated." (Elly, community worker)

*Blended hybrid: creating a collective identity*

Over two decades, OB's workplace diversity is not only strongly reflected in its social mission, but it has also become a part of its organizational practices and structure. OB's approach to workplace diversity successfully combines a community logic, reflected in a strong commitment to progressive community values, with a professional logic supporting this. The professional logic is especially clear in the way community members are incorporated into the organization and encouraged to develop their expertise in community work through training and professional development. Workplace diversity then is organized in what Skelcher & Smith (2015) define as a *blended* hybrid. Their commitment to workplace diversity contributes and allows them to attain its dual commitment to community work and professional development successfully and unify and strengthen the organizations' logics and identity. Meyers and Vallas (2016) also refer to this organizing of diversity as communitarian, meaning that inequality along social and ethnic lines is perceived as an endogenous force at work within organizations and hence needs to be discussed explicitly within the organization. Indeed, all the respondents OB shared extensive reflections on diversity as a potential source of social stratification and exclusion. In sharing his views on diversity, for example, Sami refers to instances of racism, the context in which it can occur as well as the different people that can become culpable of racist attacks.

> "There are still wounds here, no place is perfect. There is always some slip, whether is it between our target group or volunteers or with us, community workers. And it's not always the white colleagues, but also those that are supposed to embody diversity. It can be the other way around. People make mistakes because of their context. You can just discuss that here. It's not some sort of dictatorship here, because as I said, our employer stands behind everyone." (Sami, community worker)

OB's history and social mission have given rise to a particular kind of workplace diversity that is a fundamental part of the organization's work. These findings indicate that community work can function as an enabling niche of welfare organizations where the community logic can be put central in the organization's core identity and combined with a professional logic. Its social mission to focus on structural and individual bias, easily enables workplace diversity to become a part of the organizations' structure, symbols, language, and day-to-day practices. However, workplace diversity OB takes on a contextually specific form, as it is predominantly aimed at issues of race, racism, and poverty.

OB's community logic derives its authority and identity from continuously centralizing issues of inequality and highlighting attitudes among staff such as loyalty as important and valuable qualities. This has a profound influence on workplace diversity as well as on employees' roles and identities. Firstly, almost all employees recount 'feeling at home' OB, referring to their trust in management and inclusive values for everyone which fosters an environment in which employees feel comfortable to share their stories and experiences. For example, ethnic minority employees share that they feel strengthened and recognized in holding others accountable when experiencing racism. The ability to put issues of racialization at the centre of debate in the organization and being supported and reassured in doing so is often an important reason for this group to feel connected to the organization and its goals. Mounir for example, only recently migrated to Belgium recalls previous work experiences, and shares his content with OB and its workplace diversity:

> "I've had one of those jobs where you are the only Moroccan employee. You notice it's a different feeling. Not necessarily adjusting yourself, but you're more careful. I didn't have that here. Every community centre was diverse, a lot of different people and characters. I'm lucky to have this as my first job [in Belgium]. I have a bad image of other organizations. I didn't know that so many organizations have a headscarf ban for example. That was bizarre to me. I'm lucky to be here. You can be who you are and whatever makes you feel comfortable." (Mounir, community worker)

The strong sense of commitment and feeling safe to express oneself is however also experienced by ethnic majority employees. In talking about the organization's work culture and diversity program, Linda shares the following:

> "Because of the work culture here, I can express myself better and I won't feel attacked very quickly, because I feel like I get it. It's like feeling at home. I belong somewhere, so I won't feel attacked by critique because I know that there is support." (Linda, community worker)

For employees to express their identities and vocalize issues of inequality, the organization invests in the development of professional personal expertise by offering several courses on how to deal with structural and individual bias and how to vocalize concerns both within the organization as well as towards external actors. Sami, for example, shares a story about his first encounter with an employee of a partner organization. He explains how his colleague stood up for him after he received a racist remark and how, now as a senior employee he has much more

tools and knowledge to recognize and vocalize inequality. This example again illustrates the importance of community values supported by professional expertise.

> "There was a bad vibe at that moment but [my colleague] stood behind me and kept saying she believed in me. […] I couldn't say anything… I think because I wasn't working here very long and I wasn't so deep into the whole diversity context and anti-discrimination and anti-racism policy. I would react differently if something like that happened now. I was too new to confront that person, while now I would confront them immediately and tell them how inappropriate such a remark is and why it's discriminating." (Sami, community worker)

However, some employees perceived OB's focus on race/ethnicity and racism as too narrow. Following events of inappropriate behavior towards women, several female respondents have made mention of a lack of a diversity policy that goes beyond race/ethnicity and racism as well as a proactive attitude from colleagues or management to raise these issues.

> "I think we're doing a good job when it comes to racism and discrimination, but I feel like we have skipped a path or at least have not spent enough attention to issues of sexism. We should grasp that because safety and being able to offer a safe context is something that will benefit everyone." (Marie, community worker)

The same employees nonetheless share that they feel confident to express their concerns within the organization. This shows how workplace diversity guided by a community logic and 'blended' in the organizations' overall governance and professional development, fosters employees' trust and ability to openly communicate about issues of race/ethnicity and gender. The organization's social mission, its anti-discriminatory diversity policy as well as its structure characterized by low power hierarchy offers an environment where constant vigilance of inequality is the norm. In addition, this approach has created a great sense of consensus and connection among all members.

*Dealing with conflicting views on workplace diversity: safer and braver spaces*

To provide a platform for employees' requests to broaden the focus of discrimination beyond race, the organization has established a workgroup named 'safer and braver spaces'. The goal of this workgroup is to cultivate a 'safe space' for employees to go into dialogue about the different forms of inequality and discrimination. The organization being guided by a community logic facilitates social interaction that is oriented towards internal/emotional considerations. Given many employees wish to proactively act on issues of sexism and

inappropriate behavior towards women, this topic has been an important subject for discussion. Sarah explains how this takes shape:

> "We've put the discussion on the table about sexist behavior towards younger colleagues. The questions that are asked in the group are: how do you handle such a situation? Do you take action? There are positive signals, for example, we notice that people look to others for more information on how they can deal with it. Now there is a need for a better framework." (Sarah, community worker)

One of the employees OB is responsible for the network of 'safer and braver spaces' in which employees can develop professionally in expressing the organization's community values by using podium techniques to open up debates on inequality, discrimination, and racism. According to Marie, a community worker, this way of re-enacting difficult situations "[…] allows us to look at the situations we deal with as women and to think about how we can handle them. Then we discuss the cases and our techniques. And then we show others how they can take action when somebody is crossing boundaries. That can be physical, like when someone is touching your hair for example."

By installing a space for employees to express their identities and how these might become vulnerable, the organizations relinquished power to employees as they now find support in tackling a different range of issues of inequality and at the same time acquire professional expertise to address it. For Sarah and others, it is important to discuss matters of sexism, whereas for other respondents the issue of racism is put on the agenda.

## Conclusion

Societal shifts in ethnic and religious diversification have an important impact on how we shape and see various institutional orders (see e.g., Anderson-Gough et al., 2022; Sharma et al., 2020; Fathallah et al., 2020). In this chapter, we have aimed to advance institutional logics literature as well as literature on workplace diversity by highlighting how diversity as a social phenomenon can enter and shift organizational practices, structures, and identities. In doing so, this study sheds light on the challenges that nonprofits face with regard to diversity in their organizations, including resistance to change and how power is exercised.

Drawing on qualitative data of two welfare organizations in Belgium that display high ethnic and religious diversity, we have shown how a contextual counseling organization (OA) and a community work organization (OB) introduce diversity primarily through a professional and community logic, but also include aspects of the other logics as well. The results reveal that OA has partially compartmentalized its workplace diversity, by applying a new professional

approach that integrates aspects of a community logic only in one part of the organizations and for employees with a migration background only, resulting in unresolved tensions and lasting divisions. OB, on the other hand, has incorporated workplace diversity throughout its organization based on a community logic, which is oriented towards its internal environment, but succeeds in translating these community values into the professional development of its employees, hence successfully blending institutional logics within the whole organization.

OA is pursuing an approach in which ethnic and religious minorities in particular face the work responsibility to deal with the growing diversification in their target group. In previous work (Authors, forthcoming) we have shown how such a fixed identification may lead to processes of identity negotiation and power dynamics that reinforces differences and perpetuates unequal power relations. This finding confirms Thornton et al.'s (2012) argument that understanding who has power and the way it can be used must be understood within the logic that legitimizes it. Linked to the professional logic of OA is the organization's choice to develop as a segmented hybrid. While the organization posits its professional logic for the entire organization, the implementation of this logic lies predominantly in the establishment of a separate day center where Muslim employees counsel Muslim families. In our second case, we show how diversity may also be introduced through a logic of community in a community and advocacy organization. Guided by this logic, OB draws its authority, legitimacy, and identity from the perceptions of individuals that comprise the community and centralizes internal qualities such as loyalty, trust, and safety. By stating that the organization's mission is carried by everyone represented in the community, OB establishes a collective identity of differences and a generalist (rather than specialist) view of ethnic and religious minority employees. As a result, the organization can be conceived of as a blended hybrid for which diversification within the community logic is incorporated in the organization's social mission and provision, hence blending it with the professional logic within the organization.

This chapter has aimed to provide a nuanced understanding of how nonprofits approach diversity, and the organizational structures that emerge in response to implementing a diversity program. In leaning towards a particular logic, organizations may risk undermining the organization's social mission on a more structural dimension. While OA has successfully assisted ethnic and religious diversification in the workplace, they also attempt to partially conform by balancing competing expectations of employees and thereby undermining the structural dimensions of inequality. We also believe that as a community work organization, OB provides an enabling niche to cope and respond to different institutional demands and establish as a blended hybrid.

*Limitations and future research*

This chapter sheds light on how organizations are affected by institutional orders that are increasingly becoming subject to ethnic and religious diversification, which proved to be valuable because this allowed us to understand how these processes take shape and affect the organizing structure – something which has scarcely been explored. Nonetheless, further research on how institutional logics are intertwined with diversity practices and organizational governance mechanisms in different types of organizations can be a relevant step to better understand workplace diversity as well as contribute to institutional logics literature. For example, scholars may further explore the implications of specific organizational and societal contexts on field-level logics. Furthermore, while our research poses an important question as to how institutional orders are transforming in the light of growing diversification, we believe further theorization on institutional logics is also important to broaden our knowledge of how conflicts of interest may arise *within* an institutional logic. Sharma et al. (2020) provide some evidence for this and show how minorities may adhere to different (interpretations of) institutional logics than majority group members. As opposed to the organizations they work for, some communities may prioritize the community logic and ascribe different elements to it such as environmental issues, local issues, or community support (Sharma et al., 2020). This may affect nonprofit organizations as well as our present understanding of institutional logics.

# Chapter 3

# Making differences (in)visible: Identity work and power dynamics in welfare organizations in Belgium

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## Introduction

Despite claims aspiring urgent change and statements to commit to ‘diversity and equality’, nonprofit organizations have made little progress in changing the demographics of their workforce (Knoppers et al., 2015; Nickels and Leach, 2021). Critical diversity research has extensively explored how powerful actors within organizations adopt discourses of diversity, without however, changing the status quo (e.g. Holck, 2016a). In doing so, they have succeeded in offering an understanding of how diversity within organizations is historically constructed in ways that obscure unequal power relations (Gotsis and Kortezi, 2015; Janssens and Steyaert, 2019; Ahonen et al., 2014). However, focusing on *where* power lies, critical scholars tend to assume that power is a one-way, static, and centralized process: from dominant to dominated, from managers to subordinates affecting ethnic and sexual minorities, women, and persons with disabilities. This chapter examines *how* power relations mobilize between different organizational contexts – such as those which are not typically characterized by a hierarchical management structure and explores how employees from a minority background are not just ‘subject’ to power, but often negotiate power relations. Understanding *how* power is exercised in a given context has important consequences for how we understand diversity in organizations. It allows us to understand the complex and always changing organizational situations and contexts in which differences are defined as well as multiple forms of identification that people draw upon in and through discourse when navigating organizational contexts (Ahonen et al., 2014; Christiansen and Just, 2012). Or, as put by Alvesson and Willmott (2002), it allows a better understanding of how a particular identity is implicitly invoked through explicating the scene and its preconditions for people acting in it (Holck et al., 2016; Bendl et al., 2019; Ahonen et al., 2014).

In this study, we focus on how power is performed – rather than possessed – in the context of nonprofit organizations in Flanders, the northern region of Belgium and how it stands in relation to employees’ identities. The organizational frame of nonprofits, its power relations,

discursive practices, and forms of knowledge shape individual differences and people's identities in a unique way. Based on a narrative analysis of discourses of different types of employees, including those in leading functions, in two welfare organizations (a contextual safeguarding organization and a community work and development organization) we examine how differences are established within the organizational setting of welfare organizations and understand individual experiences of employees as subjects who regulate their identities herein (Christiansen and Just, 2012; Ahonen et al., 2014; Alvesson et al., 2008). Such an approach implies that we look at how differences are ascribed to employees in a certain social setting (meso-level analysis), but also at the way individuals' identities are perceived and constructed by themselves and others (micro-level analysis).

This chapter makes several contributions to the literature on the role of identity and power relations concerning diversity processes in nonprofit organizations. It firstly seeks to build on suggestions to make space for individual experiences in organizations and go beyond an analysis of how pre-determined categorization are imposed, constraining employees' identities. This study hence puts identity work at the core of understanding organization processes (see also Foldy, 2003; Holck et al., 2016; Bendl et al., 2008; Christiansen and Just, 2012; Alvesson et al., 2008; Brown, 2022; Ghorashi and Sabelis, 2013). Secondly, this study is innovative as it sheds light on how power relations are negotiated and (re)produced in a specific organizational context (Kornau et al., 2022; Brown, 2022). Finally, we provide a unique insight in the field of workplace diversity and identity by drawing attention to modes of organizing outside the ideational framework of the 'firm' (Janssens and Zanoni, 2021) and put welfare organizations at the centre of our analysis. In the next sections, we provide an overview of existing literature on diversity in the context of nonprofit organizing as well as the role of identity and identification as central concepts of diversity.

## Diversity, identity, and power in welfare organizations

Over the past two decades, there has been plenty of scholarly work analyzing how power differences in organizations affect individuals' self-identity and interpersonal relations (e.g. Joshi and Roh, 2009; Corlett et al., 2022; Alvesson and Willmott, 2002; Brown, 2022; Atewologun et al., 2016). For example, Ashforth and Schinoff (2016) argue that while organizations set the stage for employees to construct their identity by producing a myriad of social practices and professional discourses, employees in turn articulate a desired self that provides them with direction for their actions in a given organizational context. Organizational hierarchies ascribe roles (e.g., social worker, client, manager) which are, in turn, continuously

being reformulated and negotiated by employees through everyday interactions, and in and through these processes differences are constituted (Nieswand, 2017; Zanoni and Janssens, 2007; Van der Haar, 2006; Hebden, 1975).

Numerous identity scholars have described identities as becoming and situational rather than as 'being' (Hall, 1990; Christiansen and Just, 2012; Ahmed and Swan, 2006; Ahonen et al., 2014). They argue that our sense of 'who we are' is shaped by the power relationships we are subject to but that individuals do not passively go through processes of identification. Rather, they offer, modify, reject, or reinforce their positions (Van Laer and Janssens, 2014; Zanoni and Janssens, 2007; Alvesson et al., 2008). In that sense, *identity work* (i.e., how identities are formed, repaired, maintained, strengthened or revised) is an ongoing process that varies in different organizational environments (Bührmann and Schönwälder, 2017; Brown, 2015; Alvesson and Willmott, 2002). The extent to which employees can negotiate their identities at work is determined by the power relations that characterize that particular context (Fernando, 2021; Hall, 1990; Thomson and Jones, 2017; Ahonen et al., 2014).

As for welfare organizations, their goal is to reflect and (re)shape community conditions (Grønbjerg and Paarlberg, 2001). They are, in other words, street level bureaucracies where employees are tasked with interacting directly and on a daily basis with their target group, which is considered to be 'vulnerable'(Nieswand, 2017; Bacchi and Eveline, 2010). Especially due to the vulnerable target group of welfare organizations, everyday practices and interactions of employees inevitably connect the latter to multiple and intersecting dimensions of social difference such as class, language, religion, ethnicity etc. In order to provide welfare assistance and following the mission statements of welfare organizations, employees need to ensure openness and trustworthiness of interaction with this particular target group, requiring an orientation towards how people appear and how they present themselves (Nieswand, 2017). It is precisely this characteristic of nonprofit organizations that makes it important to understand diversity and the identity work that employees of welfare organizations engage in.

Although scholars have analyzed identity work of women (Van Amsterdam and van Eck, 2019; Lewis, 2013), ethnic minorities (Van Laer and Janssens, 2014; Zanoni et al., 2017; Holck, 2016b; Hennekam et al., 2020; Kamenou, 2008; Essers and Benschop, 2007; Carrim, 2019) and disabled employees (Jammaers et al., 2016; Jammaers and Zanoni, 2021) to gain a better understanding of how social differences matter in organizations, few diversity (management) studies have empirically analyzed how identity work is shaped by the organizational settings in which it takes place and have looked beyond group characteristics. With regard to the latter, scholars have argued that by emphasizing group characteristics,

identities tend to be taken for granted and are presented as pre-determined and self-contained. This approach in identity and diversity literature is also referred to by Knights and Clarke (2017) as a form of *amnesia and myopia* (Knights and Clarke, 2017).

Looking at employee differences in welfare organizations, Nieswand (2017) demonstrates the importance of diversity and identity construction. His study confirms how diversity can be understood as a configuration of categories of difference that become selected, applied, regulated and articulated through social processes, such as interactions and organizational procedures. Similarly, Janssens and Zanoni (2005) find that for several service organizations social differences are understood in terms of socio-demographic differences that affect organizations' service delivery. Their research shows how patients and employees with different cultural backgrounds are culturally defined and produced by the organization, ascribing fixed and consistent social identities. Such processes of cultural ascription are also found in welfare organizations. However, when (nonprofit) organizations define differences in terms of cultural identifications, they are more likely to mobilize power relations where they normalize a fixed, essentialized and pre-determined identity in order to deliver their services (see Janssens and Zanoni, 2005). This othering process does not eradicate the dynamic nature of identities. It only positions it in a social setting (Hall, 1990; Caza et al., 2018), making employees liable to mobilize certain cultural tools to construct and evaluate their environments (Oliveira, 2018). For example, van der Haar (2009, as cited in Nieswand, 2017) shows how employees conformed or resisted processes of cultural ascriptions which respectively reinforced an individualistic view of employees and clients or was accompanied with evocations of cultural difference and de-individualization.

In sum, building on contributions on identity work, the key tenet of this chapter is that organizations do not merely 'manage' diversity through powerful discourses or exert managerial control in order to serve the organization. Instead, we argue that managerial structures of control and organizational discourses create a particular structure of dominance that both constrains and opens up possibilities for identity regulations, top-down as well as bottom-up by employees themselves. These are fundamental processes that feed into inequalities within organizations (Lamont, 2014) – rather than managerial control. Weaving together theoretical perspectives and offering empirical contributions on power dynamics, diversity, and identity work, we hope to contribute to conversations on diversity and identities in organizations. We will draw upon two case studies in welfare organizations in Flanders, Belgium to understand the role of the given context in defining differences and the extent to which employees experience their identity as 'being different or not' in these organizations.

## Method

*Case selection*

We conducted inductive qualitative research in two welfare organizations situated in the largest metropolitan area in Flanders (northern region of Belgium). The city displays a high degree of ethnic and religious diversity and is characterized by a majority minority demographic distribution. Organizations are selected from a sample and in-depth analysis of diversity discourses of twenty-five leaders in this region. For further inquiry we selected two case studies that are considered to be committed to diversity by themselves as well as by external organizations. We believe this opens possibilities to better understand how differences are shaped under different organizational settings (Holck, 2018).

Organization A (further referred to as OA) is an organization that *'accompanies socially vulnerable families and young adults who are in a precarious living situation, regardless of their ethnic cultural background'*. OA consists of groups that are differentiated based on target groups' age categories. They offer group activities for children (6 – 12 y/o), teenagers (12 – 17 y/o) as well as individual contextual counselling for young adults (17 – 25 y/o) and families. As such, employees have a shared and individual responsibility to assist families in different living situations and are given discretionary power to fulfil this task. Organization B (further referred to as OB) aims at '*tackling the unequal structures of our society which makes people vulnerable and creates exclusion'*. They address this mission through offering community service as well as engaging in community development. This means offering low threshold community service (e.g., administrative aid) and creating participatory project work with citizens (e.g., advocacy work) to work on both practical and sustainable solutions. The metropolitan setting in which OB is located makes especially issues of racism a high priority.

*Data collection*

In total 40 semi-structured in-depth interviews (23 and 17 respectively) with employees and two directors were conducted during the period of February 2022 and May 2022. Interviews were initiated by a short statement of the research goal that was framed as gaining a better understanding diversity in the welfare sector, after which respondents were guaranteed anonymity by signing in on an ethical clearance agreement. Conversations ranged from 30 minutes to nearly two hours and were conducted in Dutch. They mostly took place in a private room in the organization, only three employees preferred to talk in a quiet place outside.

Participants were both long-term and short-term employees (ranging between one year employment to over twenty years). In OA, we also participated in a welcome course for beginning employees as well as a diversity workgroup while in OB we spend time in community centres informally talking to employees and volunteers. Transcripts were provided by a student and for the purpose of this chapter and all names are pseudonymised. There was no selection made based on any fixed identity characteristic but, as already mentioned, we chose organizations that consider themselves diverse. This diversity mostly refers to employees' ethnic and/or religious background. In Flanders, ethnic minorities or people of colour often refers to (decedents of) post-World War II migrants from Morocco and Turkey which are considered to be largest group of non-European ancestry (Stabel, 2022). While a majority of respondents had either an ethnic majority or Moroccan background, some also mentioned being of Turkish, Indian, Syrian or Egyptian ancestry.

*Data analysis*

In going into depth in the two selected cases, we firstly gathered information on the organizations' subgroups in different neighbourhoods, employee mobilization groups, as well as socio-demographic data of employees that was made available to the authors by the organizations. This study made use of a narrative analysis and drew attention to how differences are relevant and meaningful to employees in their workplace. In drawing upon these narratives, employees were able to represent their identities and surroundings which also allowed for them to organize their experiences into meaningful episodes (Fraser, 2004). Furthermore, a narrative analysis draws upon processes of (inter)subjective reasoning as being socially constructed in a specific and dynamic context, and hence applies the concept of thick description as understood by Geertz (2008).

In our coding processes, we first inductively mapped general themes for the cases such as 'defining diversity' 'cultural identity' 'collective identity' 'racism and discrimination' 'strategies to fit it', 'organizational policy' and 'organizational structure'. After this, we looked at these topics more in-depth for each case and refined the coding process after we combined the cases again to find possible similarities and differences. During this last phase, we drew up more on theoretical frameworks of diversity (management), identity work and post-structuralism to better understand processes of identification we encountered in the interviews. It is important to note that the goal of this research is not to compare two organizations and their missions or organizational characteristics. Instead, the focus of our analysis lies in

understanding how power mobilizes in a given context and how this can open up possibilities for identity work to emerge.

## Results

In this section, we elaborate on the findings of our case studies, a contextual safeguarding organization and a community work and development organization. I first discuss the discourses of diversity that emerged from employees, highlighting how these are informed by the organizational mission and based on personal experiences and the local context of working in a metropolitan city characterized by social and ethnic inequality. We then show whether employees experience themselves as being different within this setting. Here we reveal how differences can become visible, meaningful, and even contested in specific organizational settings. Finally, we look into how power relates to context – and context to power – and how organizations' can function as what Foucault (1977) refers to as structure of dominance and co-constitute unequal power relations.

### Organizations defining difference

*Individual and community service provision*

Organizations influence how individuals (should) see themselves and thus set the stage for identity construction (Ashforth and Schinoff, 2016). In both organizations under study, especially differences along ethnic lines are made visible in their professional practices (i.e., strengthening families in the upbringings of their children). Employees referred to implications of language, culture, or religion in their everyday work context. However, contrary to OB*,* these categories of difference in OA seem to primarily matter in relation to clients and to a lesser extent in relation to employees. One explanation for this is the organizations' individualistic client-based service provision. Detaching from more structural complexities in individuals' identity construction, the counsellor and coordinator of the organization's diversity work group explains the role of employees' identities in building a relationship of trust with clients.

> "One third of the success in a relationship with a client is determined not by your education, degree or methods but by who you are. That's our approach so we work with the person as a whole, whether you are a mother, a grandmother or whatever. That's why we belief 'matching' is very important. It can be a leverage to make a trajectory easier."
> (Tina, family therapist, OA)

This way of approaching differences becomes apparent when talking to employees. Axelle, a young (ethnic majority) employee for example, explains how having cultural and linguistic

differences in the organization is valuable as these differences can be mobilized to improve the capacity of the organization to build a relationship of trust and provide services tailored to the perceived needs of ethnic minority clients.

> "I think we learn from each other as colleagues about each other's culture. It also makes it accessible for clients because they feel that there are similarities… or that there are certain possibilities and that they can speak in different languages. It makes things easier. If I can't find an interpreter, I know I can ask my colleague to listen along in a conversation." (Axelle, children's counsellor, OA)

The same employee further emphasizes how ethnic diversity among employees enriches viewpoints and perspectives. Here, diversity is first and foremost a reality external to the organization that needs to be better understood in order to fulfil the organizational goal. Ethnic minority employees then, fulfil an important task in contributing to this better understanding. The organizations' focus on ethnicity and religion as prominent diversity categories is further reinforced by the existence of a daycentre for Muslim children but also the extensive and explicit adjustments made to accommodate Muslim families and employees. It is not surprising then that especially these forms of identification are visible and performed. This also leads many Muslim employees to express their appreciation of the organizations' policy that provides food according to their dietary requirements, allows for them to pray at the specified times or wear a headscarf. They feel like they have a space to which they belonged.

OB's leader on the other hand expresses a different view of how differences matter and explicitly stresses the importance of peoples multiple and dynamic identities. Its approach is more structural in that they see differences and inequalities as inevitably connected and pays explicit attention on the social processes through which differences are made visible and identities constructed within the organization. Diversity is hence not solely perceived as an external reality. The leader of OB sees diversity as "bringing people in society into the organization with their own background because you make the city with people who live here" and "you have to come as you are". As will become more clear later, this explicit choice to be cautions of people's identities allows employees to articulate, negotiate and define their identities. In OA, the organizational policy seems to conceive of differences in a more pre-determined way and refers to differences between target group members in terms of fixed identity characteristics of groups.

> "We're not going to fix anything on an individual level, we have to have a different structural policy. When it comes to racism and diversity, people in society think in a

> certain way because of the political context we are in. I think it's important in our recruitment that we select people who are aware of that and want to contribute to that debate." (Irene, leader of OB)

The aforementioned examples illustrate how the specific organizational context of welfare organizations opens possibilities for differences to emerge in different ways. For OA, ethnic or religious differences are made more visible than is the case for OB. Given its community oriented social mission and situatedness in a metropolitan city, OB focuses on categories of difference with the explicit aim of uncovering and working against social inequalities internally as well as for the community their serving. In OA, categories of difference are predominantly mobilized to tailor services to their ethnically defined target group and to better engage with ethnic minority groups. For example, Ellen, a family therapist, recalls how she often sees her client's experiencing racism, which makes her aware of her "exalted position" towards them – rather than between her colleagues.

*Employees self-expressing their ethnic background*

Many ethnic minority employees, express their sense of self in terms their own life experiences and consider the context of welfare organizations as a scene to display their ethnic identity and explain how its shapes their professional practices. More in particular, respondents share how their ethnic background has shaped their professional attitudes and motivations and how they differ from others within the same organization. For example, Sanah, an experienced social worker OB, talks about how being a person of colour impacts her professional engagement. Being different, to her, is strongly related to her own experience as a person of colour and the vulnerability to social inequalities she and her significant others have experienced. Precisely this experience makes her more responsive to these social inequities and creates a stronger sense of urgency for tackling them.

> "That's something we people of colour have, that urgency. We live in inequality every day. We see it in our environments, our friends, acquaintances, family, society. […] especially in this city. It's urgent and it hurts if you can't participate to achieve that goal in this sector. I can't get that through my head, especially if you have an organizational culture where solidarity and humanity are important." (Sanah, community worker, OB)

More than her occupational role or the organizational mission, it is her experience of being different and need to influence processes of inequality that informed Sanah's choice to be a social worker and work with minoritized groups. Sanah's experience shows how ethnic background becomes meaningful through her own experiences and is not merely ascribed top-

down by the organization. In other words, belonging to an ethnic minority group informs her 'self' primarily how she narrates the positions she holds and the nature of her interactions with others (Brown, 2015; Weller et al.). She further explains how she selected her workplace, based on the mission of this organization and her belief that her 'self' is valued by the organization. This indicates the process of self-selection where ethnic minority employees purposefully select a workplace based on the objective of an organization and the idea that their 'self' will be valued (Nelson and Vallas, 2021). Sanah is only one of several employees who narrated how being a(n) (child of) immigrant(s) and having experiences of discriminatory practices in educational and labour market trajectories makes them susceptible to ethnic and social inequalities in their occupational role as community workers, social workers or counsellors.

*Local context*

Another defining element in how employees define what diversity means lies in the social geographical setting in which the organizations are active. In both organizations, employees address and construct their own identities against the background of ethnic and social issues that are characteristic for the metropolitan city they are situated in. They often refer to their organizational setting as one where they were able to be more aware of their own class or ethnic differences. An example of how this is experienced is told by Marie, a young (ethnic majority) employee working for OB who refers to differences between her, her clients and other employees.

> "I'm white, I'm a woman, I grew up in a middle-class household, I speak without reservation. [...] this is the first organization that is so consciously working with this. [...] I feel and experience that here every day and that made my belief in [diversity] even stronger. I can't always have conversations with girls on wearing a headscarf or understand racism and discrimination, but I can gain trust, I can talk to my colleagues and I look for ways to be of support." (Marie, community worker, OB)

The process of defining oneself in contrast to their environment confirms the importance of the local context in which individuals make sense of themselves (Ashforth and Schinoff, 2016). Marie, among others, contrasts her ethnicity and class against the background of that of her clients. By doing so, she does not only define what differences mean to her, but she also internalizes a given identity as a definition of self (i.e., being a white middleclass woman). In the following section, we explore more in depth how employees experience their own identity as being different or not.

## Employees becoming different

*A sense of belonging*

How the organizational setting can open possibilities for differences to become (in)visible and how this affects how employees perceive themselves is expressed in the following quote from Driss. Growing up in a dense neighbourhood with a majority of Moroccan immigrants he recalls his first experience OB as the following:

> "I come from the street life a little bit, so I was not used to giving kisses to my coordinators on Christmas or having a Christmas party. That was new to me. And…I'm happy they accepted that I rather don't [give kisses]. A hand is sufficient for me. They could have said 'no, that's part of it, you're supposed to give a kiss during this celebration', but they respected my choice." (Driss, community worker, OB)

Hakim, also a young Muslim man working in OA children's daycentre for Muslims tells us that he is proud to be part of OA and he feels that *'whatever your roots are, you get the opportunity to function here as a full member and counsellor'.* He especially considers his cultural skills and repertoire (such as his multilingualism) an addition to his professional skills as a counsellor and an asset for families. In addition, he believes his job as a social welfare counsellor is of great importance as a practicing Muslim, again suggesting ethnic minority employees' attempt to self-select their occupational roles. However, at the same time these findings can also indicate a process whereby ethnic minorities aim to get access to certain jobs in a labour market characterized by ethnic inequality through a process of self-ethnicization. In this case, employees might show contentment and even pride to deploy their so called delineated ethnic identity in order to gain access to stable labour market positions (see also Faist, 2010). Not surprisingly, feelings of belonging by ethnic minorities in OA were mainly anchored in social group identities, also suggesting that they can more easily be interchangeable.

Whereas minority employees in both organizations refer to feelings of belonging, this was more often the case by many employees OB and more so regardless of their (ethnic) background. One possible explanation is OBs' explicit choice to view differences as not just a reality external to the organization, but as constituted in and through the organization and the caution the organization displays around people's identities and how they are related to structural inequalities in society. As mentioned earlier, this allows employees to have a sense of belonging and meaning and creates space for them to articulate, negotiate and define their identities themselves, such as was the case for Driss. Contrasting this with past experiences in

other jobs and in higher education where he felt alienated, Hussein also explains that this is a feeling he has not encountered very often.

> "I often wonder in my life what I'm doing at a certain place on a certain moment, because I feel that I don't belong there. But I don't have that here and I'm proud of that. […] Like I said, I can be myself here with my own background. I don't feel like the odd one out." (Hussein, community worker, OB)

The organizations' approach to differences makes them visible, but in such a way that employees can negotiate and discuss these with other employees creating a strong awareness of how differences are inherently tied to social inequality. Feelings of belonging in OB are thus more anchored in personalized discourses of individual and interpersonal differences.

*Fractious identity work*

Becoming different often is the result of processes of identity work whereby individuals negotiate in order to reach a consensual understanding regarding 'who is who' (Swann et al., 2009). Our results show how a particular organizational setting can trigger different negotiation processes and lead to fractious identity work. Firstly, both organizations put emphasis on religion and culture, making these important categories of difference under scrutiny. Not surprisingly, this was especially the case in ethnically and religiously heterogeneous settings. Specifically in the daycentre for teenagers OA, employees had different, often contrasting views on the role of these differences. While Muslim Moroccan women deemed their cultural and religious identities important in understanding and working with teenagers, this was often rejected by their white colleagues, who argued for a more individualistic approach. Sofia, a young Muslim counsellor in this daycentre calls her work environment an *'us versus them situation'*. On the other hand, a (ethnic majority, non-religious) counsellor, who up until recently was also part of this daycentre, talks about how she doubted the professionality of her colleagues because certain ideas on marriage, gender or sex may be informed by certain cultural or religious beliefs that are not in line with ethnic majorities values such as individualism.

> "It does make me wonder about the difference of saying something professionally but seeing this differently in your private life. […] It was about a lot of things like are we going to put up posters about abortion or not. I would hear people talking with teenagers and think 'is that appropriate for them to say that?' or 'what do they do when a teenager makes a bad comment about homosexuality?'. What accents do people set?" (Rita, counsellor young adults, OA)

Sofia mentions this as well and shares with how cultural differences are seemingly always a subject matter for her ethnic majority colleagues.

> "For example, one of my colleagues was pressuring teenagers to eat with cutlery because that was the norm. I think it's okay for them to eat fries with their hands if they are clean. What's the matter with that?! But then they tell us they're in Belgium, they should follow the values and norms of the country they live in!" (Sofia, teenagers' counsellor, OA)

In this example, Sofia illustrates how everyday practices in the daycentre become sites for fractious identity work. On the contrary, Axelle, who works in the children's daycentre OA informs us that views on religion or culture are never an issue among her and her colleagues. Employees in other daycentres and individual counsellors recount this as well. Axelle clearly describes how and why topics regarding religion or culture have much less importance for children compared to teenagers. She shows how the context of working in a daycentre with teenagers, for whom questions about identity are very important to search and understand their position in society and hence are a prominent part of the everyday work context in this part of the organization, has important implication for how differences between counsellors come to surface.

> "With teenagers… they are really searching for their identities. Everything is questioned, while with the little ones they ask questions out of curiosity. I notice when they are older, they ask questions like 'Who am I? What do I find important?' […] I think matching someone who can guide you whether it is about religious questions or sexual preference is more important. Not that it's not important for children but it's different. For example, with religion, if I ask them what the month Ramadhan means, they will say 'it's a month in which we don't eat'. But the older ones would be thinking about their role within Islam, how they want to see it, why they find it important. They attach more importance to it." (Axelle, children's counsellor, OA)

So, while many ethnic and religious minoritized employees OA find that their employment opens the possibility to express their ethnic and religious identities in a society and labour market where this is often not the case, others also point to the lack of space to resist and negotiate a pre-determined and fixed identity of being 'the Moroccan' or 'the Muslim'. After many tensions with colleagues in the daycentre for teenagers, Sofia continues and strikingly summarizes the situation as follows:

> "It's like it's the only quality I have, being a Moroccan. They say it almost every day. […] It is as if it's both your strength and pitfall. As if it's the only part of my identity.

> You're so much more than your culture. You're so much more than your ethnicity or your sexual preference or whatever. But it quickly gets offered when it's in their convenience." (Sofia, teenagers' counsellor daycentre, OA)

On the other hand, Annick, who used to work in the teenage daycentre, talks about how she experienced differences become visible between her and her colleagues and how this shed light on her own identity.

> "You suddenly feel that it is not self-evident anymore to understand each other. In our Flemish team, we had people from the same background, with the same role, the same values and norms, framework, Catholicism we grew up with. Because we we're raised that way, it seemed as if we understood each other a lot faster. Having diversity required more alignment and conversation, but it was enriching, and it made sense. […] But when a female colleague says she doesn't want to do a swimming activity[22] with the teenagers it feels like everybody has a judgement on what you do as a Flemish woman. What does that say about me?" (Annick, counsellor for young adults, OA)

When cultural or religious differences become visible, Annick becomes aware of her own identity as a 'Flemish' woman, something she did not have to consider before working in an ethnically 'homogenous' environment. Annick further continues to elaborate on how she dealt with these changes in the teenagers' daycentre and how moving to individual counselling of young adults made differences become more invisible again.

> "Suddenly you're insecure and thinking 'am I doing something wrong?'. But at a certain point I made a switch that I am Flemish, end of story. I stay who I am. But that was a search in the beginning because I was overwhelmed with ideas with how things are in other cultures. […] In individual counselling it's easier because you don't interact with families. I have that with traditional families but these young adults they're just searching for who they are."

In talking about how she was doubting herself, Annick recounts that this idea of accepting herself as 'Flemish woman' – and thus actively defining her ethnic identity and doing identity work– is something that mainly rests on the alteration to the 'otherness' of traditional families. Now, as an individual counsellor to young adults she does not have the need to actively negotiate that identity as she is not faced with the 'Other' anymore (Ahmed, 2012). In addition, reduced proximity to her colleagues as well as the individual relationship she can build with

[22] The majority of local swimming pools in the Flemish region of Belgium have a prohibition on wearing covered bathing suits (see Brems et al., 2018)

her clients allows for her to have more space to give meaning to her identity as a Flemish woman.

### Mobilizing power in organizational settings

The previous findings show how a given organizational setting and mission can give meaning to what differences mean as well as how they come to surface. In this subsection we look more closely at how organizations deal with differences in these organizational settings. Rather than merely *constructing* differences, we argue that the possible identification of employees and the enactment of differences takes place in organizations as structure of dominance (Christiansen and Just, 2012). This implicates that employees bring their dynamic and multiple identities to work and give meaning to their identities *within* a power laden occupational role and setting. An example is shown through Sanah's experience. Sanah explains how as a social worker of color for which diversity is important in her work she is not able to pursue her professional engagement in certain organizations, where this is considered radical.

> "The context, and with that I also mean the organizational culture, really decides how you look at [diversity]. I worked in a large, hierarchal organization with a lot of unwritten rules. There, I could have some sort of civic engagement, but not too outspoken. Now, I feel like a thorn inside of the sector […] constantly raising awareness about all sorts of social issues. In the large organization I was an extremist raising awareness for diversity and equality." (Sanah, community worker, OB)

Now, working in community work and development Sanah feels a shared urgency in a place where "the job profile and organizational profile are aligned".

The question then remains as to how power is mobilized in these organizational settings. In OA*,* the case of the daycentre for teenagers makes clear how this particular setting as well as the organizations' focus on religion and culture as categories of difference can impose a fixed and centred notion of ethnic and religious minorities identities on employees, thus shrinking the space for negotiating identities. First of all, in order to pursue its mission and help families, OA values identities of employees that are attached to the roles people occupy in society. Their situatedness in a metropolitan city especially draws attention to culture, religion, language as dimensions of difference. But it is especially the teenagers' daycentre that becomes a site where employees continuously negotiate and (re)define their identities. As mentioned by Axelle, this is because the specific nature of dealing with teenagers in an ethnically and religiously diverse context, makes especially issues of identity construction come to forefront. But it is the organizations' way of dealing with tensions between employees that shows how it functions as

a structure of dominance and co-constitutes skewed power relations. Khadija, an experienced counsellor in the daycentre explains that as workplace tensions grew bigger between her and a queer (ethnic majority) colleague, conflicts arose after which she was accused of being homophobic. Despite addressing what she experienced as racism and prejudice towards her as a Muslim woman, she did not feel heard by the organizations' management, whom she believed dismissed her concerns.

> "I tried talking to [my managing director] and open up a conversation about racism [...] I even gave an example just to make her understand racism. I asked her if she had never encountered sexism as a female manager and she said she had never experienced that. So guess what she meant is that it is your own fault if something like that happens."

Khadija later explains how she felt after these accusations by her colleagues, the lack of understanding by her superior and how she took matters in her own hand.

> "I never felt heard. They made accusations, calling me homophobic. I was an aggressor, even though I try my very best to be very careful with how I express myself. [...] At some point I was really mad and I'd had enough. [...] I used every opportunity I had to complain. That was the thing that eventually got people to listen to me. They basically gave me the message: don't play by the rules, cheat and then we will listen to you. [...] Eventually I joined a work group we have on sexuality so I could tell my side of the story. I still feel like I haven't processed what happened because it feels so unfair. [...] I never got an apology, so it's difficult to put all of it behind me. I try, but every time I talk about it, like now, I just feel like I want to clear out my heart." (Khadija, teenagers' counsellor, OA)

In understanding how differences are constituted and how and why identity work occurs, we argue that it is necessary to look at the organizational setting as a space of dominance where differences can be made (in)visible. The story of Khadija reflects how this happens in the context of OA and how the organization partakes in essentializing individuals' identities with regard to their culture and/or religion. What is often called 'business case for diversity' in diversity research is in this particular context the absence to recognize the dynamic selves of individuals who constantly create, negotiate and articulate their identities. Only an essentialized identity of 'the Muslim' or 'the ethnic minority' is ascribed and recognized, leading to tensions between employees in certain contexts and little room for negotiating these identities. In OB on the other hand, differences were actively drawn upon in order to recognize and address how they create structural mechanisms of exclusion. In the organization, almost all employees recall feeling at home, being heard and "being the norm".

# Conclusion

The aim of this research is to understand *how* diversity is constituted in a given organizational context, rather than understanding it as a deployable concept that merely refers to socio-demographic characteristics of the workforce. We argue that the organizational frame of nonprofits with its power relations, discursive practices, and forms of knowledge shape individual differences and identities in a unique way and that exposing this allows us to also better understand differences as dynamic, situational and a site of contestation (Ahonen et al., 2014). Previously, critical diversity research has shown how minorities are controlled in organizations through managerial and identity regulating discourses and how individuals engage with this control (Van Laer and Janssens, 2014; Jammaers and Zanoni, 2021). However, both (critical) scholars as well as practitioners have for long viewed differences in terms of essentialized and normalized categories of socio-demographic difference. In doing so, organizations have highlighted the structuring of inequalities along social identities and have contributed to the (re)production of inequality in contemporary societies. Given their pursuit to achieve transformational change and challenge social inequality, we argue that this approach to diversity is especially problematic for nonprofit organizations. Drawing on post-structuralist approaches, this research aimed to refine this understanding of power and context. We departed from a destabilized and normalized understanding of socio-demographic categories in order to make space for individual experiences beyond usual diversity categorization and have done so with attention to the organizational setting of welfare organizations. We have shown how organizations tend to become structures of dominance when they create insufficient space and recognition for identity work. We hence belief it is a necessary task not only for organizations to destabilize notions of stigmatized social groups, but also for researchers to not assume diversity exists in terms of fixed and essentialized categories. This research has attempted to provide a step in that direction.

In our two case studies, we have demonstrated how employees' experiences, the organizational mission and situatedness in a metropolitan city can especially make ethnicity and religion, as socio-demographic categories more and less visible and more and less contested in terms of meaning. Our findings show that even though ethnic minority employees are not numerical minorities, they can become *minoritized* in certain organizational contexts. At the head of OB stands a leader that explicitly expresses a conviction of seeing people's multiple identities with attention to structural inequalities. They have what Meyers and Vallas (2016) call a communitarian diversity regime, which is a structurally oriented and vigilant approach

regarding (ethnic) inequalities. Despite not having what is often referred to as a 'diversity policy', the organization did create space for employees to express and negotiate their multiple identities. Indeed, conversations with employees OB made clear how they feel seen and acknowledged by the organization. This was particularly noticeable when employees referred to being heard by their management whether it was about issues regarding physical disabilities, racism, sexism, or class.

In OA, leaders also acknowledged people's multiple identities. However, contrary to community work, their goal as a contextual safeguarding organization for families opens up an more individualistic and essentialist view of clients and employees. This was further strengthened by the organizations' choice to create a separate daycentre for Muslim and Moroccan employees in time and space which facilitated to compartmentalize and leverage ethnic and religious identity markers (Gotsi et al., 2010). While drawing attention to this diversity categories allowed ethnic minority employees to express their ethnic and religious identities in a society characterized by ethnic and social inequality as well as offer leverage for social inclusion of an ethnically diverse target group, there is problematic consequences to this separation as it essentially instrumentalizes and categorizes employees' identities. The results also showed how the historical, regional, and organizational context opened up space for ethnic and religious minorities to be subjected to identity devaluation whereby majority group members not only essentialize and constrict minoritized employees' identities' but also degrade and contest it leading to tense identity work processes.

*Limitations and further research*

This study focused on the organizational setting of welfare organizations, which proved to be valuable because this allowed us to understand how particular organizational social settings define differences – something which diversity researchers have scarcely explored – as well as understanding experiences of employees beyond the categorization of their identities. Nonetheless, further research into how power and institutional, regional, and national contexts are intertwined can be a fruitful step in diversity research. Furthermore, the selected cases are 'diverse' in terms of gender, ethnicity, religion, (dis)ability etc. Looking at (Flanders') nonprofit organizations, this composition is rather exceptional, suggesting that other structures with distinct power dynamics, organizational policies and diversity compositions should be researched. Finally, our results also revealed how organizational change processes, government policy and organizational structure (such as a transition in power distance) can affect how

differences are made (in)visible. While this was not at heart of this research, our data suggest that it would be valuable to direct our attention to how these organizational characteristics can create potential differences in identity work.

# Chapter 4
# Navigating essentialism in qualitative research on diversity: reflections of an ethnic minority researcher

## Introduction

"Diversity researchers must acknowledge that they do not see and speak from nowhere but are always already positioned in relation to their topics of research."
(Just et al., 2021)

This chapter addresses my role as a young qualitative scholar engaging with diversity research. It is well known that the relationship between researcher and interviewee plays an important role in qualitative research contexts (Rhodes, 1994; Berger, 2015). One of the aspects often under scrutiny within this scholarly work draws attention to ethnic identity[23] positions of researchers and participants and how these play into the established power dynamics in the research context. Traditionally, methodological reflections on 'ethnicity-of-interviewer' effects consider the asymmetrical relationship between white researchers and racial or ethnic minority respondents. This research relationship is often characterized by the 'powerful' researcher and the 'compliant' or 'vulnerable' respondent, suggesting that (non-)whiteness and the researchers' social positioning are stable and fixed (Hoong Sin, 2007: 278; Giampapa, 2011; Bashir, 2020). This fixed and essentialized view of the researcher-researched relationship is however increasingly being contested by scholars who argue that the research process is a dynamic practice through which identities are produced and through which the position of the researcher may shift according to certain identity dimensions. As such, research participants too may create and alter subjective identity positions, establishing a relation between the researcher and researched that is fluid, continuously defined, and negotiated through intersections of gender, age, class and, ethnicity (Bashir, 2020; Kostet, 2021; Osanami Törngren and Ngeh, 2018; Merriam et al., 2001; Bravo-Moreno, 2003; Giampapa, 2011). In similar vein,

[23] This chapter mainly draws upon the notion of ethnicity, which refers to a self-identification with a social category based on religious, cultural, or linguistic differences. While both are categories of material exclusion and have been shown to affect research encounters, this conceptualization must be distinguished from the concept of race which is generally defined as a social construct based on physical characteristics.

diversity scholars are increasingly searching for new ways of defining diversity without reducing individuals to specific social identities (Just et al., 2021).

This chapter aims to offer a reflexive account of the researcher-researched relationship by drawing on an interpretation of my experience as an ethnic minority researcher predominantly facing ethnic majority respondents in research on diversity (Hertz, 1996). I show how as I explored the narratives of participants on workplace diversity, my position as an ethnic minority researcher was affected by the various ways respondents essentialized and reduced me to my identity as an ethnic minority. I argue that this reflection plays a crucial role in highlighting how respondents reconstruct, debate, and assign identities (Mathijssen et al.), ultimately bringing more understanding to how power dynamics can shift during qualitative research.

The methodological reflection in this chapter is especially relevant as it considers research on diversity issues in organizations, which necessarily involve dynamics of power among different ethnic groups. In that sense, this chapter lays out an act of reflexivity where the researcher also becomes the research subject, hence opening the way to more consciousness of self while also constructing knowledge on diversity (Hertz, 1996). Indeed, as I will show, not only did my identity as an ethnic minority shift my position during interviews, but the encounters with white majority respondents unexpectedly revealed real-life knowledge of how these organizations and their members may deal with diversity (management). However, my involvement in this research process was not exempt from any shortcomings on my part. While I attempt to address how research participants essentialized the ethnic minority identity, I believe many of the interviews remain on a surface level and that, had I inquired more about their meaning, I would have been able to go deeper into ways of essentialization. I believe a part of this is related to my reservation to be assertive and confrontational as to not jeopardize a harmonious and conscientious conversation. However, this on itself was a consequence of the power imbalance I experienced during these interviews and looking back, a way to protect myself from continuous confrontation and having to act defiantly against these harmful discourses. Either way, even if I had addressed my respondents directly on their perspective of ethnic minorities, I still believe this contribution reveals how ethnic identity dimensions are socially less recognized, that many participants hold views which recognize this inferior identity position and that this is in fact a precarious position for ethnic minority scholars.

This chapter, hence, contributes to the literature in two ways. It firstly draws attention to the role of ethnic identity dimensions in qualitative research and how this affects established power dynamics rendering the researcher vulnerable. While researchers from a majority ethnic

background are likely to encounter shifting power dynamics in the research setting as well (see e.g., Rhodes, 1994; Riley et al., 2003; Råheim et al., 2016; Arendell, 1997), recent studies have drawn attention to the ways ethnic minority researchers in particular face a reversal of conventional power dynamics in consequence of their socially less recognized identity position (Kostet, 2021; Hoong Sin, 2007; Osanami Törngren and Ngeh, 2018; Egharevba, 2001). In their reflexive account, for example, Osanami Törngren and Ngeh (2018) notably show how respondents can shift minority researchers' positioning in several instances by communicating boundaries of race and ethnicity during interviews, reversing 'the traditional' power imbalance. In a similar vein, Kostet (2021) shows how such demarcations are even created by children, challenging the researchers' ethnic and working-class background (Kostet, 2021). There is, however, only a scarce body of research that centralizes the shifting boundaries that ethnic minorities encounter as researchers. This chapter, therefore, contributes to this growing, but still limited research stream by offering a reflexive account from the perspective of the ethnic minority researcher.

Secondly, this chapter draws specific attention to processes of essentialization in the field of diversity research. While scholars have offered reflections on how researchers may reproduce fixed and essentialist views of minorities (Amadasi and Holliday, 2018; Sou, 2021), little is known about how essentialist discourses of the researchers' identity may affect the position of researchers and the researcher-researched relationship and the power dynamics between them. However, as an act of symbolic communication affecting relationships through exclusion, I argue that drawing attention to discursive practices of essentialism in qualitative research may contribute to our understanding of the qualitative research context (Werbner, 1997; Said, 1978; Morton et al., 2009). Essentialism, as Werbner (1997) defines it, 'means to impute a fundamental, basic, absolutely necessary constitutive quality to a person, social category, ethnic group, religious community, or nation. […] affecting the destiny of these groups' (Werbner, 1997: 228). In diversity research, essentialism is often identified as a discursive practice upon which organizational members draw to resist ethnic diversity in their organization (see e.g., Spaaij et al., 2018). Drawing on discourses of essentialism, whether it is regarding organizational members or when facing a researcher, therefore, allows those with power to maintain their position of power. Analyzing how essentialist notions and ethnic boundaries are drawn in qualitative research, therefore, allows us to understand the constantly shifting ground upon which qualitative researchers stand and which can lead to their vulnerability as researchers.

## The research context

In this doctoral dissertation, I have focused on how leaders of nonprofit organizations perceive workplace diversity, how this aligns with their governance discourse and, how it is introduced into their organizational structures (see Author, forthcoming). I also analyze how this affects the ways staff members shift and negotiate their identities in the workplace (see Author, forthcoming). The first round of my data collection consisted of 25 interviews with leaders of nonprofit organizations. With the expectation of two respondents, all the participants in this interview round belonged to Flanders' ethnic majority (11 men and 12 women). The second round consisted of 40 interviews with staff members who belonged to both Flanders' ethnic majority and ethnic minority.

Nonprofit organizations are characterized by their commitment to social justice and improving the quality of life in communities (Anheier, 2006). The communities they are serving, however, are increasingly becoming more diverse in terms of ethnicities, beliefs, and ideas, inevitably affecting the sector. More than ever, nonprofit organizations today are challenged to respond to a growing diversity in terms of racial, ethnic and, religious differences (Faist, 2010) as well as the growing societal (re)politicization of social differences along educational, gender, and socio-economic lines as a matter of social justice. This repoliticization has been made particularly visible in the widespread series of protests against Black racism in 2020, galvanized by the Black Lives Matter movement. While already a topic of interest in many organizations, the movement accelerated and sparked wide debates on how organizations should deal with issues of racism, diversity, and equality (Mir and Zanoni, 2021). This is also the case for nonprofit organizations in Flanders, who often (aim to) serve a large group of ethnic minority target groups and for which the movement strikingly confronted the tensions they had already been dealing with.

Although I had already started my doctoral dissertation before the Black Lives Matters events, my research coincided with a period where respondents had already had vigorous conversations and plans on workplace diversity in their organizations. Diversity increasingly seemed to become a pressing matter and justifiably it seems, as research shows that the nonprofit sector in Belgium is characterized by significant ethnic segmentation, where boards and directors are almost exclusively white and service provision is mainly aimed at ethnic minorities (Laoukili et al., 2019). Taking this as the vantage point of my doctoral dissertation, I found it particularly interesting to further inquire how these organizations perceive their role

as nonprofit organizations with regard to the growing ethnic diversity that is so visible in Flemish society.

While I had also interviewed ethnic majority staff members, it was especially during the first round of data collection with nonprofit leaders that I unexpectedly encountered the various essentialist views respondents held of ethnic minorities, ultimately shifting the power dynamics between us. Although I was not always aware of the age of the respondents, I suspect that this aspect of their identity, along with their professional experience, which surpassed my own, contributed to these palpable shifts. On several occasions, I felt I needed to become a passive subject that listened to seniors for them to cooperate and put their trust in me. However, while this compliant and uneasy position arose from an interaction of identity dimensions such as their age or professional experience, it was especially our different ethnic backgrounds that amplified a skewed dynamic between us.

On several occasions, respondents referred to 'diversity' in the same breath as ethnic representation, leading our conversations to largely revolve around ethnic minorities. In the context of Flanders, this is not surprising. While the Black Lives Matter events were an important catalyst for opening the public debate on institutional racism, they were however just that: a catalyst. The movement drew attention to longstanding societal issues such as systemic racism and ethnic and social inequalities characterizing Flanders. This profound consciousness of positionalities, identities, and differences has more recently been fueled by right-wing conservatism in Flanders and has led to contentious debates that predominantly define ethnicity, culture, language, and religion as the main categories through which the 'other' is defined (De Cleen et al., 2017; Van Ruyskensvelde and Berghmans, 2020). This may contribute to how organizations refer to 'diversity'. That is, consisting of ethnic identity as a significant predictor of differences. At the same time, these debates are being exemplified today by public discussions on 'wokeness', a term often used pejoratively towards those who problematize social inequalities such as racism (see e.g., Willaert et al., 2022). However, this also implies that my ethnic identity and the ways I articulate social inequalities as a researcher and sociologist become a matter of susceptibility and more vulnerable to acts of symbolic violence.

## Navigating differences and dual social contexts

In developing a better understanding of the ways the relationship between myself and research participants was affected through ethnic identity dimensions, I will briefly shed light on what this position entails for me. In sharing my experience, I hope to address the emergent and situational nature of vulnerability (see also Bashir, 2020).

Growing up as an ethnic minority in Belgium, it has become natural for me to move between members of my ethnic group and institutions of white majority group members and to navigate the differences between them. These differences cannot be overlooked, as they span not only ethnic differences but also differences in class, culture, and gender perceptions. My father was born in the rural outskirts of the Rif region in Morocco and stopped tending to the family's land when he started working as a guest laborer in Belgium at the age of 15. Like many Moroccan migrants, my grandparents decided to settle permanently in Belgium to escape the dependency on seasonal agricultural labour and to provide a better economic and educational future for their (grand)children. With no education whatsoever, my father entered the Belgium labour market and married my mother, who until then had lived in a small village in the Rif as well. I am the sixth of seven children.

As is common for working-class immigrant families (see Moguérou and Santelli, 2015), my parents often expressed high educational (and employment) aspirations for their children. Their aspirations impacted not only the choice of school where their children would go to but also where we lived. An attempt for them to create better life chances for their children lies also in their own view of ethnic minorities. My parents avoided what they – through the eyes of the outside world – considered stigmatized communities with a dense immigrant population out of fear it would affect us more than our socio-economic position already did. As a result, I grew up in a middle-class neighborhood and attended a strenuous Catholic school with a general educational program (as opposed to vocational) which people often – but falsely – perceive as more qualitative and providing better educational opportunities.

As such, from my earliest memory, I have always moved in predominantly white environments as one of few ethnic and religious minorities. This dual social context is not alien to me, so I have mastered a certain flexibility with which I could navigate through these different social (or ethnic) structures. I found it evident that conducting interviews would mean I would find myself again in this context where I would shift into a different yet familiar ethnic and class identity. Given this familiar duality and doing research on diversity in a time where issues of racism and inequality were profoundly outspoken, I had prepared myself for how respondents might answer desirably when facing an ethnic minority researcher. On the other hand, I have often experienced ambiguity as to my ethnicity in Belgium because of my light skin as a Northern African and a fairly common surname – Sara – so I thought I was prepared for the ways respondents would code me as white and thus 'one of them'. This is not to say that I feel like I am 'one of them'. Being accustomed to white majority institutions has only made me more aware of the differences between us and equipped me with knowledge on how I should

act to navigate in white middle-class surroundings. As such, I anticipated this 'discursive smartness' by preparing additional questions for respondents to illustrate workplace practices. My concerns as to respondents' social desirability were eventually unwarranted. The distinctness of my ethnic minority background and the disadvantaged position that comes with it proved to tell more than I had anticipated on how research participants viewed (ethnic) diversity as I was allowed to first-hand experience leaders' essentialist comments and ideas on ethnic minorities.

## Results

The analysis in this section demonstrates the narratives of research participants and my experience as a researcher with an ethnic minority background doing research on diversity in nonprofit organizations. On several occasions during the conversations between myself and white majority research participants, my position as a researcher shifted according to the ways respondents essentialized my ethnic minority background. I more specifically highlight how this identity essentializing occurred through processes of commodification and stigmatization. I also shed light on how my presence as an ethnic minority researcher exacerbated respondents' self-consciousness with regard to how they viewed ethnic minorities. Here too, respondents displayed how nonprofit leaders and staff members may engage with 'diversity' in an essentialist manner. In the following paragraphs, I show how at times these processes have led to a reversal of the traditional power balance between researcher and participant and how this has affected not only me but the entire research context.

### Institutional narratives and ethnic capitalism

The nonprofit sector is increasingly adopting business-like communicative and operational practices in its everyday organizational life (see Sanders and McClellan, 2014; Maier et al., 2016). Doing my research shortly after the BLM movement, many nonprofit leaders shared their experience of a growing pressure to reflect their ethnically diverse target group in order to stay '*credible*' and '*legitimate*'. During conversations with respondents, workplace diversity was often perceived as a functional necessity and linked to the organizations' chance of survival and a better alignment of client services to 'diverse' clientele. The way organizations derive and attribute value from ethnic diversity in the workplace has been well documented in multiple studies. These studies show how ethnic (or racial) identities become essentialized and commodified to serve dominant social and economic needs and interests (Zanoni and Janssens, 2004; Ahmed, 2007a; Ahmed, 2012; Saha and Van Lente, 2022), a process Robinson (1983)

and others conceptualize as *racial or ethnic capitalism* (Leong, 2012; Goldstein Hode and Meisenbach, 2017; Robinson, 2020a; Go, 2021). My research, among others, shows that nonprofit organizations too, engage in acts of ethnic commodification to fulfil their social mission.

Some of the key topics in my questionnaire elaborated on how leaders of nonprofits (aim to) shape their diversity program, the diversity in their staff, and their overall perception of diversity. Initially, I expected these conversations would mostly revolve around their attempt to establish a diversity program that aligned with their social justice missions as nonprofits. I was surprised to learn that many leaders had no idea how to deal with *workplace* diversity instead of their usual *target group* diversity in which they provided a servicing role. Not only did I often have to shift the conversations back to ethnic minorities as part of their organizations rather than as recipients of their services, but what struck me the most is how some leaders were not able to respond to the question of *why* workplace diversity mattered to them beyond instrumental narratives. In various instances, respondents simply referred to the importance of ethnic identity as a way to serve organizational needs and interests. In the case of most nonprofits, many leaders explained that diversity is particularly important as it allows them to better deal with 'issues' they have with their ethnic minority target group and which white majority employees were not able to deal with. These 'issues' revolved around language barriers or different cultural or religious understandings. As such, it was important for them to hire ethnic minority employees in service of their ethnic minority clientele. Stephanie, a white ethnic majority woman and head of a nonprofit organization dealing with residential care for vulnerable teenagers and refugees describes why she hired an ethnic minority mentor only to work with refugees:

Stephanie: "Normally with regular Flemish job applicants, I have certain standards. They have to be versatile and flexible and be able to work with different groups in the organization. But with her [ethnic minority employee], I found her good to work with our refugee group. I don't find her very flexible but because she works well in that [refugee] group, so I did eventually hire her."

Researcher: "Why exactly was she less flexible?"

Stephanie: "I don't know… I think maybe because she is more practice-oriented."

While Stephanie argues that the reason for the ethnic minority employees' placement in the refugee group lies in her more practice-oriented character, she gives little information on what

this exactly entails and continues to talk about other mentors. By drawing on the narrative of serviceable ethnic minorities, respondents like Stephanie implicitly reveal an essentialist view of ethnic minorities as being only suited for particular types of work or services. This idea of serviceability however also came up in terms of benefitting the image of the organization. During one of the conversations, Cédric, a white male leader of a sociocultural nonprofit, explains the following:

> Cédric: "There are some men here who react strongly and say: 'These days you have to be a woman and have some colour to get a good position'. But personally, I think that would be a very powerful statement for our organization. I don't know a lot of organizations who can say, our now director is… not a white male. But I'm not sure how you can do something like that with integrity and not fall into… saying 'we need someone from a certain group…' […] It would be a great choice, precisely because it is a statement."

While opposing himself from other men in his organization from a more 'progressive' standpoint, Cédric himself draws on a very business-like discourse by stating that having a director with an ethnic minority background is primarily of interest because it would be a *'powerful statement*' as an organization in the predominantly white Flemish socio-cultural sector. Other respondents too referred to ethnic minority employees as something they could '*use'* or '*score with'* to gain legitimacy within the nonprofit sector. I did not react to these comments and even at times adopted their wording while asking questions. Even if I had wanted to, I was unable to provide a counter-reaction as these remarks felt normal to me too. This is not to say that they did not affect me in any way, rather, the feeling of being assigned an inferior and commodified position myself was something that I had encountered in my academic career when colleagues explicitly questioned my objectivity in diversity research or when organizations invited me to panels because they '*needed more representational diversity'*. As such, this act of silencing myself was born out of fear that I would jeopardize my researcher position and come off to my respondents as too critical and perhaps as a biased researcher because of my ethnic background.

### Vicarious experience of stigma

The process of essentializing and instrumentalizing ethnic minority employees is closely linked to processes of stigmatization attached to the capacities of ethnic minorities. In several of her works, Michèle Lamont (2014; 2018; Lamont et al., 2014) outlines how cultural identification

processes such as racialization and stigmatization contain essentialist and fixed narratives about the relative worth and positioning of various groups, reinforcing inequality in the distribution of resources, such as occupations. Stigmatization processes can serve the interests of organizations in subtle ways that according to Link and Phelan (2014) are indirect, and often hidden in taken-for-granted cultural situations. It has been well documented how these processes of essentialist thinking perpetuate inequalities detrimental to ethnic minorities in Flemish education (Colak et al., 2020; Mampaey and Huisman, 2022), further contributing to ethnic stratification in the labor market (Lenaers, 2010). Typically, these stigmatizing narratives point to ethnic minorities' lacking embodied cultural capital (e.g., language skill), institutionalized cultural capital (e.g., level of education), and objectified cultural capital (e.g., cultural and literary activities) (Bourdieu, 1986; Lamont et al., 2014).

While conducting interviews with welfare and sociocultural organizations in Flanders, these cultural processes proved to be an important source of identification for organizations. Again, the respondent's essentialized view of the ethnic minority identity was revealed, occurring now through the process of stigmatization. Nonprofit leaders often draw on a discourse of professionalism referring to formal standards (educational level) and informal skills (hobbies or 'passion') that need to be met by candidates (see Author, forthcoming). However, when asked what these skills exactly were, their responses often underlyingly displayed the idea of ethnic minorities as lacking cultural capital due to their educational backgrounds or unfamiliarity with middle-class vocabulary. This was made especially clear when asking respondents how they would like to shape their diversity program. Kathleen, head of a sociocultural organization concludes the following:

Kathleen: "I think you should find the right competencies and don't set the bar too high. […] We would like to hire someone of foreign origin to manage a project about integration for newcomers but that means we need to ask people with certain skills."

Researcher: "What kind of skills are important for that person to have?"

Kathleen: "Good question… because you can have other good candidates. I think it would be important if that person has 'experience expertise' as a foreigner but also a 'diverse' network."

I had encountered this idea of '*not setting the bar too high'* as a way to attract ethnic minority candidates during other interviews as well. In doing so, respondents revealed a demarcation between those who need accessibility (ethnic minority group members) and those who don't

(ethnic majority group members). As a result of this, I became highly conscious of not saying something 'wrong' myself and hoped that respondents would fill the conversation so that I would not have to say too much, as I feared being perceived as ignorant because of my ethnic background. However, I often regretted not asking directly what this threshold implied for example, and in what sense respondents considered themselves to be part of some sort of categorization above this threshold. When I did talk, I was particularly aware to prove my worthiness as a researcher and demonstrate my expertise as well as my trust. This urge to silence oneself or to be susceptible to providing certain knowledge has also been documented in methodological reflections of other minority scholars (see Hoong Sin, 2007).

Another stigma that I observed participants attach to ethnic minorities was the lack of embodied and objectified cultural capital, which was presumed to belong to a dominant white middle class. As such, leaders laid out certain expectations for ethnic minorities that for them stand in contrast to their expectations for majority group members.

> Cédric: "It comes down to if you keep talking in that culture language or not. We have a middle-class audience that watches Canvas, listens to Radio 1, and reads de Standaard. […] But we're going to start a trajectory to focus on more accessibility in terms of language, communication, vision, and representation of course. But… we're not going to do a random selection of someone who gets kicked out for someone who has a little color."

Besides describing diversity as a powerful statement for the organization, Cédric addresses that the organization first needs to adjust its *'cultural language'*: a language that is only comprehensible to middle-class environments. These environments engage with particular kinds of television, radio channels, and newspapers which according to Cédric belong to a specific, more dominant, class culture and stand in clear contrast with ethnic minorities' – accessible, hence limited – cultural capital. Consequently, he too concludes that there is a need to be more 'accessible'. Although this reasoning reflects a genuine desire to transform the organizations' socio-demographic composition, the way Cédric and Kathleen focus on a general, more simplified 'otherness' reveals how they position themselves towards other members of society and how they view ethnic minorities as lacking 'conventional' skills or capacities. This is further reinforced by Cédrics' previous allusion to the ethnic minority as a statement and the essentialization of ethnic minority employees as individuals 'with a little colour'.

Other respondents explicitly shared how they experienced difficulties in understanding ethnic minorities saying, '*You do come up against things of which we Flemish people think*

*'how is it possible that you treat your daughter, wife or son this way.' We don't do that here.'* When participants exposed these stories, ideas, or assumptions about ethnic minorities, I vicariously experienced the stigma attached to this group – and thus myself. Undoubtedly, these ideas are driven and reinforced by the reality that many nonprofit organizations are characterized by ethnic segmentation where they predominantly work *for* ethnic minorities as service recipients and to a much lesser extent *with* them (Laoukili et al., 2019), hence dismissing any need to rethink the dominant cultural norms and values in these organizations. By assuming the need for more easy or accessible language or framing the idea that the organization can '*serve as a steppingstone'* or *'open doors',* respondents often implicitly draw on stigmatizing narratives that point to ethnic minorities' lack of cultural capital. I was continuously reminded during these conversations that I – perhaps not through my academic background but certainly my ethnic background – was seen as less sophisticated. I sensed this unequal power relation even more when respondents directly addressed my ethnic background, such as done by Rachel. After a short hesitation, what seemed as insecurity as to how she should refer to ethnic minorities, Rachel, a director of a socio-cultural organization directly addresses me to illustrate how she would make job vacancies more accessible to ethnic minorities.

> Rachel: "Sometimes we present a job vacancy to…to… to you for example. We would say 'Sara, read this, what are the things you think of? Would you apply for this?' and then you can explain things that we could clarify or how to make it more accessible… And also, call upon your networks. I'd send my vacancy to you because I would think 'Sara can share this within her own network.' That will be a much more diverse network than mine."

Through this interaction, Rachel addresses my ethnic minority background and makes assumptions about how I, coming from this background, would be able to scan her job vacancy on its sophistication and share this with my so-called 'diverse' network. As an academic now moving in predominantly white and middle-class surroundings, I found it quite ironic to be perceived as someone who would use 'accessible' language. In addition, in her assumption of my 'diverse' network, Rachel positions me as a sort of representative of my ethnic group. It was only after having a conversation of almost two hours that Rachel addressed me as a researcher, inquiring more about my job.

> Rachel: "But tell me, Sara, what is it exactly that you do?"

However, after again explaining the goal of my research as I did at the beginning of our conversation, Rachel gives no direct response and continues to refer to my ethnic background and my so-called ‘more exceptional’ profile:

| | |
|---|---|
| Rachel: | “Don’t you feel like coming to our board?” |
| Researcher: | [awkwardly] “Oh… well I already have a lot of commitments…” |
| Rachel: | “Yes, that’s right, of course, those few like you are already everywhere” [laughs]. |

Needless to say, I felt extremely uncomfortable during and after this conversation. Rachel continuously addressed my ethnic background and even approached me to recruit me *because* of my ethnic background. This marked the end of my interaction with Rachel and revealed what I had always feared since being an academic; Rachel perceived me as an ethnic minority above all and at best as a researcher (and with that thus a very exceptional ethnic minority). The clear distinction drawn by Rachel between the category of researcher and ethnic minority confirmed the inferior position assigned to the latter category, leading to a sense of self-consciousness and vulnerability throughout this interview.

**Exacerbating self-consciousness**

While I construct this narrative of vulnerability, I believe my respondents too felt under scrutiny having to answer questions about ethnic diversity from an ethnic minority scholar. It is commonly understood that the social dynamic between the ‘white’ researcher and the participant in qualitative research can influence the research process and this requires a deeply reflexive stance (Charmaz and Belgrave, 2007). However, I believe it must be brought to our attention as to how exactly ethnic minority scholars may affect participants’ self-consciousness and perhaps uneasiness in talking about issues of diversity or inequality and how they can navigate these discussions while protecting themselves. As for myself, it was only after a while when I was able to understand and shake off my feeling of powerlessness, I realized that my identity must have exacerbated my respondents’ self-consciousness.

However, as opposed to myself, some respondents were not reluctant to silence themselves despite their self-consciousness facing an ethnic minority researcher. Several times, respondents directly addressed my identity (and never theirs) in an essentializing manner, revealing the power relation between us and how only my ethnic background was a significant identification. For example, at the end of our interview, Geert admittingly concludes that me

being there that day, conversing with him on diversity had increased his awareness on this matter as he rarely thinks about this topic. At the same time, my presence at that moment as an ethnic minority researcher meant he was not sure if he had to because, after pausing and pondering for a while, he concludes the following:

Geert: "You have stimulated some awareness… We work with our target group and… […] Perhaps it's wishful thinking, but wouldn't things change by themselves… By themselves is easy of course but… […] If you work hard and your PhD will be received with a lot of praise and so on… Why… I don't see why that would change if you can become a professor… What would hold people back from choosing you instead of your… white opponent."

I sensed that Geert felt slightly uncomfortable or perhaps even ashamed to admit that he has always seen ethnic minorities as the service recipients he works *for* – rather than *with*. However, immediately reflecting on my position as a researcher, Geert chose to position me – despite my ethnic minority background – in a favorable light and proof that inequality might not be such a problem after all. In doing so, Geert reveals at this moment his privilege to avoid recognizing and addressing issues of inequality as well as his privilege to fill this in on my behalf.

I also noticed respondents' increased awareness during a conversation with Lindsey, a staff member. Having many ethnic minority colleagues, Lindsey explains how she believes that everybody is free to express their identity in the organization. She also shares how ethnic minorities prove to be valuable because they can be 'deployed' with regard to the organizations' needs, drawing on a discourse of commodification. During our conversation, Lindsey also talks about her disadvantaged socio-economic background growing up and explains that she is not inclined to share this part of her identity with colleagues. In the middle of sharing her thoughts, Lindsey pauses and turns her attention to me:

Lindsey: "Can I ask you a question the other way around?"

Researcher: "Yes…?"

Lindsey: "I was just wondering… with your name or… well I don't know if you are Muslim… I wonder… because I don't want to deploy that part of who I am, I want to be seen for my skills and who I am today. But is that a feeling you [plural] have? Or well, you personally maybe and not all…"

I was very well aware of the fact that staff members preferred to hide their sexual preferences, socio-economic background, and even disabilities, while at the same time seeking out their

ethnic minority colleagues for culturally related questions. While trying to deflect the conversation back to her and elaborate on this, Lindsey addresses me once again asking me:

> Lindsey: "But do you ever think 'oh no this again'? Anyway, well, I just wondered [laughs]."

Just like Rachel and Geert, Lindsey directly addresses me as an ethnic minority and even assumed my religion without ever specifically knowing my ethnic or religious background. She also directly asked me if members of 'my community' would like to be seen for their skills, and thus, again, directly puts me on the spot and positions me as a representative of my community, rather than as an individual researcher. This encounter again strikingly shows how ethnic minority researchers face essentialist notions about who they are and how they are seen as representatives of their ethnicity, rather than as individuals with their unique perspectives and experiences (see also Ahmed, 2012). Despite their self-consciousness about what to say or how to act when facing an ethnic minority researcher, Geert, and Lindsey did not feel reluctant to address me directly with their assumptions about my identity. While this shift in power relations has been laid out by other scholars as well (e.g., Ahmed, 2012; Osanami Törngren and Ngeh, 2018; Kostet, 2021), my analysis shows that diversity researchers with an ethnic minority background, in particular, should be mindful of these dynamics that occur and how they might bring them in a position of vulnerability and powerlessness.

## Conclusion

This chapter highlights the importance of acknowledging the dynamic and negotiable nature of the researcher-researched relationship, particularly in the context of diversity research. It demonstrates how the researcher's ethnic identity is essentialized in various ways, leading to shifting power dynamics during interviews with ethnic majority respondents. The contribution of this chapter is twofold; it brings more understanding into how the position of ethnic minority researchers may shift during qualitative research as well as how diversity research can pose specific challenges for ethnic minority researchers. More in particular, the encounters outlined in this chapter show how ethnic majority respondents may subject ethnic minorities to a disadvantaged position through a discourse of commodification and stigmatization processes as well as how the researcher may become vulnerable through processes of control. By recognizing and understanding these dynamics, we can gain a deeper insight into diversity issues and the complex power relations involved as well as the ongoing discourse on the

complexities of qualitative research and the importance of reflexivity in understanding the research process.

The focus on ethnic identity dimensions in particular proved to be important for several reasons. Firstly, researching diversity, I had conventionally prepared myself for how respondents might answer desirably when facing an ethnic minority researcher. I was however not prepared to face such an essentialization of my own ethnic identity. Believing nonprofit organizations are committed to fulfilling an emancipatory role in society, I – perhaps naively – did not expect that doing interviews on diversity as a researcher with an ethnic minority background would pose so many emotional and relational difficulties to myself. This experience revealed to me an important hiatus in how we as qualitative researchers are prepared to go out into the field and how we are tough to deal with social desirability bias. Instead of having to overcome social desirability bias, my research revealed that ethnic majority respondents were not reluctant to directly and indirectly present their cultural norms and beliefs as legitimate while marginalizing or stigmatizing the skills, practices, and beliefs of minority groups, even when facing a researcher from an ethnic minority group. As such, the visibility of my ethnic minority background and the disadvantaged position that comes with it proved to tell more than I had anticipated on how research participants viewed (ethnic) diversity as I was allowed to first-hand experience leaders' comments and ideas on ethnic minorities. These encounters are particularly telling about the precarious positions to which ethnic minority researchers may be exposed within diversity research. These experiences show how scholars conducting studies on diversity and ethnicity, in particular, should be equipped better as to how they can prepare themselves to deal with such acts of symbolic violence (see also Kostet, 2021). Furthermore, when delving into diversity management research, one quickly learns that diversity or 'difference' is often theoretically and empirically defined in essentialist terms to begin with (Villesèche et al., 2018b), leaving ethnic minority researchers with fixed conceptualizations of their own identity and bearing great responsibility to challenge this from an already vulnerable position.

Finally, while my research addressed diversity issues, others, albeit a limited number of scholars have similarly experienced dynamics of power shift within research encounters on other topics. My research contributes to these methodological reflections as it gives a reflexive account of how identities can be defined and negotiated through ethnic identity dimensions, regardless of the research topic. Whether it is constructing an institutional narrative that commodifies employees' ethnic background or cultural assumptions made about ethnic minorities, what the presented analysis shows is how the ethnic identity becomes commonly

scrutinized, and situated as a 'subject' (Hoong Sin, 2007: 480). As such, it must be understood that being a researcher as a member of an ethnic minority group can pose important challenges that can impact researchers' well-being and the ways they can contribute to knowledge production, making it an urgent matter to address these power dynamics in qualitative research. This would not only protect vulnerable researchers who may face a socially disadvantaged position but also offers a counterweight to the dominance of research that only draws attention to the ways researchers can provide participant comfort and safety (Bashir, 2020).

# PART III

# Concluding reflections

In this doctoral dissertation, I have addressed how workplace diversity in nonprofit organizations is rooted in organizational processes and characteristics. I have more specifically aimed to capture the way social differences are established in this context and what this ultimately means in terms of power relations and recognition of identity work. By exploring and analyzing how nonprofit actors conceptualize and implement diversity, I was able to unravel the logic behind (introducing) diversity and how employees shape their identities within this organizational context. I have furthermore reflected on the potential implications and challenges of doing diversity research from my own perspective as a researcher with an ethnic minority background. In doing so, this dissertation considers – or at least aims to make calls for consideration – the mechanisms that allow some individuals to become included or excluded from diversity and what the implications and consequences of these differentiations. In the following of this concluding chapter, I will first give a brief recapitulation of the proposed research goals and further elaborate on the contributions, implications and limitations of this research and share a last reflexive note on my position within the research process.

Critical diversity scholarship offers an important conceptual framing and analytic leverage to unpack the dominant narratives that perpetuate workplace inequalities. This dissertation has, however, addressed two vital points of concern. I have firstly argued that critical research on the relationship between organizational mechanisms, processes, and structures on the one hand, and the emergence of workplace differences on the other hand – especially in nonprofit studies – remains relatively scarce. Studies that do attend to this relationship are often limited to determining the impact of various diversity 'factors' or 'dimensions' (Ahonen and Tienari, 2015). For example, in researching community, organizational, and general board characteristics, Bradshaw and Fredette (2013) aim to understand how these environmental factors influence the representation and effectiveness of ethnic diversity on nonprofit organizations (see also Rolf et al., 2022). Scholars are, moreover, increasingly pointing out that despite decades of diversity (management) research, workplace inequality still persists (Özbilgin, 2019; Ahonen et al., 2014; Nkomo et al., 2019; Janssens and Zanoni, 2014). While attempts for eliminating inequality in the workplace do not only depend on academic endeavors, is argued that one possible explanation for the current lack of substantial improvements towards inclusive workplaces lies in the restricted conceptualization (managerial versus moral) that is dominant in diversity scholarship and the scarce attention

given to understanding how and under which circumstances differences emerge. It is, therefore, that Greedharry et al. (2021) propose that we need to unveil the process of categorizing and defining differences in the workplace, or, in other words take into consideration the processes and mechanisms by which differences are turned into diversity. This moreover involves moving beyond mainstream and critical diversity management. Only then can we analyze the underlying logics behind 'diversity' in organizations and thoroughly address the power dynamics that are confined within it.

A second point I have discussed in this dissertation, is that diversity research too often takes the business firm as a 'neutral' background for understanding workplace difference. I have thus aimed to contribute to research on workplace diversity and nonprofit scholarship by centralizing the specific setting of nonprofit organizations. I argue that looking at the construction of diversity in this context is especially relevant because of the sectors' responsibility to be mission-driven by pursuit of social or societal value (Oosterlynck et al., 2019). Nonprofit researchers are increasingly addressing the rapidly changing society in which these organizations operate. They have, for example, extensively laid out how nonprofits need to cater to increasingly demanding service recipients, cope with limited resources, or meet higher levels of accountability and legitimacy (Anheier et al., 2019; Verschuere et al., 2017; Fernandez et al., 2022). Several attempts have also been made to understand how diversity and inclusion impacts' nonprofits' social change efforts. However, currently, diversity in nonprofit studies is at best an ambiguous concept, one of which the variations have been noted but not fully mapped, certainly not in the same way as it has been done for decades in organization and management research. It is, therefore, by and large a concept that takes different forms and definitions and carries a specific meaning depending on its performative use of a managerial or ethical approach.

## Unveiling differences in Flemish nonprofit organizations

This research has aimed to go beyond the managerial and ethical approaches that are dominant in research on diversity in nonprofit organizations by looking at the specific contextual complexity within which diversity is constructed. This is not to say that this dissertation does not have any progressive ends whatsoever, rather its primary goal is the identification, observation and verification of what constitutes differences and diversity so as to meticulously uncover how it may also perpetuate inequality in nonprofit organizations. Our first research question, therefore, has sought to broader our understanding of the various ways diversity is

conceptualized and implemented in Flemish nonprofit organizations. I have addressed this question by firstly examining discourses of nonprofit leaders as key decision-makers. Although having one single source of information has its limitations, leaders' perspectives on the meaning of diversity and whether it might be of organizational importance allowed us to unravel some of the dominant boundary conditions that makes diversity matter for various nonprofit organizations. I have particularly shown that, in practice, organization's perspective of diversity moves beyond the aforementioned dualism and can be shaped by a wider variety of discourses on governance such as a professional, domestic, grassroots, and civic discourse. These discourses include various nonprofit governance systems, including systems where governance boards do not play an important role, and pertain to the way organizations talk about governance (Maier and Meyer, 2011). By looking closer at two welfare organizations, I have, furthermore, examined how the emergence of diversity and differences may also be tied to the broader institutional logics in which nonprofits operate, to their organizational structures and what this all means for employees' identities. The outcomes prompt us to suggest that diversity is not something that is simply managed through discourses of control but rather enacted through various circumstances, processes and mechanisms. In the following paragraphs, I will go over some of the main findings of this dissertation.

I have started this dissertation by reflecting on the societal position of ethnic, cultural and religious minorities in Flanders and how their societal and political exclusion impacts the regions' labour market stratification today. Indeed, diversity in our research often reflects existing inequalities, and only rarely were they challenged by nonprofit organizations. This research suggests that one possible explanation for this lies in the fact that nonprofit organizations often justify approaching diversity in terms of their external and material environment to ensure organizational performance (see Table 9). Organizations with a grassroots discourse, for example, place the responsibility for integrating diversity outside of the organization because – in line with grassroots democracy values – membership criteria are based on members' own initiative and identification with the organization. When the organizations' grassroots values do not necessary align with more equality, diversity will likely be merely tolerated and accepted, decoupled from any form of action and channeled into a fixed organizational context.

Besides the fact that diversity is often externally oriented, and differences are almost exclusively talked about from an ethnic perspective, the results also indicate that many nonprofit leaders focus on professionalist standards when referring to ethnic and religious minority employees and workplace diversity. For nonprofit organizations such as umbrella

organizations or healthcare institutions, expertise is a critical asset. One leader for example, shared that as an umbrella organization their gained expertise is important in enabling them to fulfill their role as advocates, facilitators, and supporters of their member organizations and have a more substantial and positive impact on the issues and causes they represent. A professionalist discourse, therefore, plays an unmistakable role in their overall governance and is therefore more prevalent. However, with regard to ethnic minorities in particular, many organizations with other governance discourses explicitly described sough-after qualifications in terms of professionalist standards: formal education, language skills, but also to less tangible criteria such as ‘commitment’, ‘passion’ for nonprofit work, the ability to understand the organization’s ‘framework’ and identification with the social mission of the organization. Moreover, in chapter four, I have explored how the categorization and recruitment of ‘ethnic minorities’ is put in relation to serving organizational needs and interests and how this group is perceived as lacking ‘conventional skills’.

This finding is partly in line with previous research that concludes that Flemish nonprofit organizations perceive employment of ethnic minorities in their organizations from an assimilationist perspective arguing that access to their organizations is contingent upon ethnic minorities’ efforts to learn and adopt the Dutch language and Flemish ‘values and norms’ (Laoukili et al., 2019). Organizations, hence, may draw on a professionalist narrative in a way that reinforces ethnic and cultural homogeneity in the workplace. So, while nonprofits in a neo-corporatist welfare state are less prone to be influenced by a market logic and implement business like practices (Verschuere et al., 2017; Suykens et al., 2023), our result do reveal that increased accountability of nonprofit organizations toward more professionalist standards in terms of competencies and performance criteria may (unintentionally) serve as a way to ward off the need to deal with workplace differences.

While exploring governance discourses of nonprofit organizations allows for a better understanding of how diversity is conceptualized and implemented in the organization, it offers limited insights into the actual process of categorizing and defining differences in the workplace. To do so, requires us to explore *how* power is enacted and through which logic it is legitimized (Thornton et al., 2012). Compared to governance discourses, institutional logics allow us to focus on field-level logics and provide a more comprehensive view of how broader cultural factors influence organizational decision-making and interactions. While an organizations’ governance discourse focuses specifically on how governance is understood and discussed *within* nonprofit organizations, institutional logic thus has a wider scope, encompassing cultural symbols, practices, and beliefs that shape all aspects of an organization's

behavior and identity. In chapter two, I have therefore addressed the underlying logic behind diversity of two critical and reputational cases and, through in-depth interviews with employees, examined the existence and emergence of differences in the workplace. While the two cases are characterized by their domestic and civic governance discourse, I uncovered how an underlying professionalist institutional logic plays an important role with regard to workplace diversity. Within this logic, specialized knowledge and skills are centralized and the strategies, norms, and control mechanisms governing social interactions are oriented toward the external and material environment (Beagles, 2022; Thornton et al., 2012). This is especially the case for OA, which is an organization with an overall domestic discourse. Following Maier and Meyer (2011), we have categorized this discourse in organizations as one that considers a high accountability towards the target group, and an informal way of interacting in the workplace and appreciation for being considerate and 'fitting' in. While the latter might be indicative of a community logic through its centralizing of loyalty and group harmony, their goal to ensure access and accountability toward their target group is more likely to be fulfilled from a professionalist logic.

In chapter two, our analysis on OA revealed how diversity in particular is installed through a professionalist logic because it was introduced as a way to meet the needs of service users. As the demographic composition of the organizations' beneficiaries became more and more ethnically and religiously diverse, the organizations' 'conventional' professional logic required a transformation which entailed that OA would need to match their employees' background to that of beneficiaries, to foster a sense of (cultural and religious) familiarity and support. Differences are therefore constructed and perceived from an access perspective, focusing on increasing organizational effectiveness by establishing a better match between organizational demographics and those of their beneficiaries as critical stakeholders. However, as I have noted in chapter one, we may expect that an access perspective within a domestic governance discourse creates organizational resistance when it comes to changing structural elements in the organization with regard to diversity, as this is at odds with securing a harmonious 'fit' and atmosphere (Fitzsimmons and Callan, 2020). The analysis of OA in chapter two confirms this and uncovers that the organization aims to ensure a climate of 'closeness' by structurally compartmentalizing their workplace diversity through the establishment of a daycentre for Muslim beneficiaries. By doing so, they are able to introduce 'diversity' within a 'new' professional approach that integrates aspects of a community logic only in one part of the organizations and for employees with a migration background only. Organizational capacities are thus determined by an external and material orientation (Beagles,

2022), leading to an instrumental view of organizational identities. This especially holds true for employees with an ethnic and religious minority background who, consequently, at times feel reduced to their ethnic or religious identity position.

Table 9 Overview of governance discourses and diversity characteristics

| Governance discourse | Diversity approach | Strategies, norms and other control mechanism to govern workplace differences | Implications | Examples |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Professional | Colorblind<br>belief in meritocracy and employees' 'valuable' skills | Externally and materially orientated | Reflects and strengthens dominant power relations | Employment counselling, umbrella organization, |
| Grassroots | Fairness<br>responsibility for integrating diversity is located outside of the organization | Externally and materially orientated | Decoupled from action | Environmental organization, art organization |
| Domestic | Access<br>internally reflecting the external environment as a means to gain access to diverse networks and experiences | Externally and materially orientated | Differences decoupled from organizational structure | Social service organization, recreational youth organization |
| Civic | Integration and Learning<br>diversity aligns and fosters (community oriented) social mission | Internally and emotionally oriented | Addressing issues of community organizing and inequalities | Community work organization, social service organization |

In other words, OA is pursuing an approach in which ethnic and religious minorities in particular face the work responsibility to deal with the growing diversification in their target group. In chapter three, I have examined how the organizations' approach to differences imposes and constrains employees' identities. While the structural reinforcement of a subunit for Muslim beneficiaries allows ethnic minority employees to express their ethnic and religious identities in a society characterized by ethnic and social inequality, this separation essentially reduces and categorizes employees' identities creating tense identity negotiations in the workplace: ethnic and religious minorities consciously aim to create, negotiate and articulate their *multiple and dynamic* identities, while ethnic majority respondents offer resistance by emphasizing the importance of employees' organizational skills and expertise, i.e., a 'conventional' professional logic. The results of this study thus suggest that workplace differences and inequalities in the organization are enacted through its' governance discourse, organizational structure and practices. When talking with respondents from OA, employees do not claim, however, to simply suffer under the control of higher authorities or mechanisms in their organizations. Rather, the results show that they engage in tense identity work processes.

While specialized knowledge and skills also played an important role in OB, it did not surface as the organizations' dominant logic to govern workplace differences. Rather, the organization and its' employees almost unanimously share that their goal is to centralize the perceptions of individuals that comprise the community. Because of this, the organization has incorporated workplace diversity based on a community logic, which is oriented towards its internal environment. OB, however, succeeds in translating these community values into the professional development of its employees, therefore successfully blending both community and professional institutional logics within the organization. We thus identified OB as an organization which has introduced diversity in alignment with its mission for social change, that is, community building. This internal and emotional orientation and the corresponding community logic is moreover in line with the organizations' governance discourse and diversity perspective, as we have discussed in chapter one. We have more specifically shown that the organization can be perceived as one that is overall influenced by a civic discourse, meaning that their goal is to unify and strengthen a sense of collectivism both within the organization as well as towards external actors. We have also posited that such organizations are likely to approach diversity from an integration and learning perspective. This means that workplace diversity is perceived as something that can and needs to benefit all members, making it mutually adaptive for everyone and, hence, possible to structurally incorporate both a professional and community institutional logic.

It is also within this context that OB sets the stage for identity construction. Instead of preliminary assigning employees an identity position, employees in OB feel encouraged to express their multiple and dynamic identities. Moreover, because workplace diversity is guided by a community logic and 'blended' in the organizations' overall governance and professional development, employees' feel trusted to openly communicate issues related to ethnicity and gender. The organizations' social mission, anti-discriminatory diversity policy, and low-power hierarchy structure create an environment where constant vigilance of inequality is the professional norm, and workplace differences are embraced and integrated into a collective organizational identity. This also became evident when, by chance, I came across employees who proudly wore sweaters with their organization's emblem outside of the workplace.

In Table 10, a schematic overview of the two organizations is given according to their overall governance discourse, diversity approach, strategies, norms and control mechanisms to govern differences, the institutional logic through which diversity is introduced, and finally how employees' identities are formed, maintained, strengthened or revised. We argue that these criteria suggest important implications for workforce diversity as well as the possibility of power dynamics playing out differently within different discourses and logics. The presented categories should however be viewed as analytical abstractions that serve to facilitate our understanding of workplace differences across the two case studies. As shown in chapter two and three, the outcomes observed in each case study are shaped by the specific contexts, histories, geographies, and organizational dynamics of the respective organizations. As such, the results cannot be directly generalizable to all nonprofit organizations. The actual manifestation and interpretation of differences, diversity and power in the workplace is likely to be influenced by a myriad of organizational factors and external influences, some of which I have discussed and others which I have chosen not to incorporate as to maintain a clear focus and depth for the purpose of this dissertation. Finally, as briefly touched upon in chapter one, it is important to recognize that a domestic discourse[24] does not necessary indicate that diversity will be approached from an access perspective. In fact, we have posited that through its need to ensure harmonious, informal and 'family-like' interactions in the workplace, organizations may opt for a diversity approach that reinforces homogeneity. In this case, we could expect that the organization would have an internal and emotional orientation to govern social interactions and

[24] See page 52 for the description of a domestic discourse.

would try to minimize workplace differences to ensure that organizational practices, values and beliefs align with a community logic.

Table 10 Overview of governance discourse and diversity characteristics for OA and OB

| | Governance discourse | Diversity approach | Strategies, norms and other control mechanism to govern workplace differences | Institutional logic through which diversity is incorporated | Hybrid structure | Workplace differences | Identity work characterized by |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **OA** | Domestic | Access perspective | External and material orientation | Professional logic | Segmented | Pre-determined ethnic and religious differences | Fractious negotiations |
| **OB** | Civic | Integration and learning perspective | Internal and emotional orientation | Community logic | Blended | Self-informed multiple and dynamic identities | Mutual consideration |

## Navigating differences in nonprofit organizations: what's next?

Following the main conclusions of the study, I would like to propose some directions for nonprofit organizations to navigate workplace diversity as well as elaborate on some limitations and avenues for future research. This dissertation has shown that to understand the introduction and demand for diversity in nonprofit organizations, we first need to (i) recognize the variety of organizations within this sector and (ii) meticulously assess the meaning of diversity in relation to discourses of governance, broader institutional logics and organization practices and structures. Only by carefully examining the myriad of these contextual factors, can we understand what differences mean, how they become 'diversity' and how power is played out in organizations.

While it would be enticing and undoubtedly practical to present 'best practices', my research compels me to firstly suggest a rather intricate way of looking at diversity. Rather than viewing diversity as a fixed and definite given which could or should be introduced in the organization, I argue that it would be more accurate and effective for organizations to practice awareness and reflexivity regarding how the organization interacts with sociodemographic shifts in their environment. This means that, instead of 'dealing' with 'diversity', I believe organizations (and scholars) should first conduct a comprehensive assessment of how and why they (co)construct the differences they perceive as meaningful. To do so requires practitioners to elaborate on their own organizational setting and reflect and identify on the effects, tensions, ambivalence and opportunities of diversity. While it might be rather ambiguous and obstruse for organizations to identify their governance discourse, nonprofits could consider how their structure, guidelines, processes, and framework interact to achieve the organization's mission, and subsequently what introducing 'diversity' contributes to their overall governance system. By doing so, they can discern the role of diversity within their governance system, its contribution to their broader objectives, and whether this contribution is oriented towards internal or external considerations as this impacts membership criteria. This study has demonstrated that such an approach provides greater clarity on the meaning of 'diversity' in a particular context and leads to a deeper understanding of the mechanisms that shape workplace differences and the implications of (co)constructing these distinctions. This assessment, however, does little to problematize the (co)construction of differences in terms of power and inequality. Doing so requires not only awareness and reflexivity regarding the organizational praxis, but also critical performativity. I will, however, elaborate on this later in this conclusion.

This dissertation only sheds a partial light on the mechanisms and processes by which difference appears in nonprofit organizations. While choosing to interview organizational leaders as key-decision makers proved to be a useful way to gain insight in various governance discourses, it does not capture the entirety and day-to-day reality of their governance system. Doing so, would require scholars to shed light on various organizational actors, policies, procedures that govern the organizations' finances, operations, and ethics (Anheier, 2014). The result of this research prompt us to consider, for example, how governments, volunteers and board members may play an important role in how diversity is perceived and formed. Some respondents mentioned that volunteers and board members, who often have a long history with involvement in the organization, showed resistance towards 'diversification'. Moreover, one of the leaders in this study briefly mentioned the absence of a government policy with regard to diversity and, contrary to other respondents', expressed a desire for more involvement. This also aligns with the organizations' advocacy toward more community building.

> "We are not addressed by the government on the presence of ethnic cultural minorities in our personnel team, and I think we should be. There is far too much assumption that we have to raise awareness and we have to rely on the goodwill of the sectors, but that goodwill is not going to come... The only thing we have imposed on ourselves is that we, with the management, are going to do make an effort. Diversity is then dependent on the conviction of whoever has power in the organization at that time. The only power factor you can put against it is subsidization or pressure from the government."

While I did not expand further on these actors and their involvement in shaping diversity, my results do suggest that they could play a significant role and that certain nonprofit organizations may hold different perspectives as to how regional or national governments (should) deal with workplace diversity. Exploring multiple actors and stakeholders as well as a larger sample of organizations would therefore allow for comparative analyses, unveiling patterns and variations in diversity practices across different organizations, organizational sizes, and geographic regions. Moreover, the reliance on two case studies, while essential for in-depth analysis, could also be expanded in future research to include a broader range of nonprofit organizations with diverse contexts and characteristics. Especially investigating the longitudinal effects of diversity initiatives and changes in organizational practices over time could provide valuable insights into the way differences are constructed in the workplace. While only mentioned tangentially, the results also indicate that certain organizational processes such as power hierarchy and the evolution towards self-regulatory teams may also be important in determining

how workplace diversity comes to be. As to my knowledge, no research has however been done evaluating these processes with relation to diversity.

This research is thus characterized by a limited scope of understanding the complexity and dynamics of how differences are conceptualized and implemented within nonprofit organizations. To develop a more comprehensive picture, future research should, therefore, strive to incorporate multiple perspectives from various organizational stakeholders, such as employees, board members, and other external partners as well as shed light on various organizational processes. By doing so, researchers can gain a deeper understanding of how different actors perceive, experience, and contribute to the making of 'diversity' and unravel the interplay of power, agency, and identity construction within organizations.

My second suggestion concerns the professionalization[25] of the nonprofit sector. Our research indicated that when considering 'diversity', many nonprofit leaders draw on a discourse of professionalism, and that in fact organizations may introduce diversity from a professionalist institutional logic as to improve their service provision. This finding substantiates previous research that observes an evolution in nonprofit organizations towards an increasingly more professionalized management and service delivery (Verschuere et al., 2017; DiMaggio and Anheier, 1990). Especially in the Flemish, neo-corporatist context, research shows that nonprofit organizations are confronted with hierarchical oversight and negotiated partnership by the government, leading to increased attention to procedural and performance monitoring. This higher focus on results could reflect a more New Public Management-style interest in the performance of the organizations (Pauly et al., 2021).

While research is needed on how exactly workplace diversity interacts with increased expectations toward professionalization – especially in a neo-corporatist context, some nonprofit scholars have recently asserted that this evolution in the sector leads to knowledge and experience from a very narrow frame, that of the dominant group (Danley and Blessett, 2022; Heckler, 2019). Researching nonprofits in the US, a liberal welfare context, Heckler (2019) for example contends that men and whites are stereotypically associated with higher

[25] Professionalization in this context, involves, among other things, the establishment of standardized qualifications, ethical codes, a governing body to oversee the profession's practices etc. This should be distinguished from the professionalization of management and services through marketization strategies, particularly in a neo-corporatist context, where activities such as revenue generation through fee-based services, partnerships with for-profit entities, and the adoption of marketing techniques to attract donors and clients are often not the primary focus. A study by Pauly et al. (2021) indeed shows little evidence of market-type governance or New Public Management strategies in Flanders. Professionalization and managerialism in nonprofits thus have distinct and complex impacts on workforces that are not yet completely understood (McLennan, 2022; Pauly et al., 2021).

levels of professionalism and expertise. Consequently, organizations often rely on intuitive assessments, prioritizing the consideration of white men as candidates. In a similar vein, Alexander and Fernandez (2021) argue that professionalization in the US contributes to segregation in nonprofit organizations by mirroring existing ethnic divisions. What is thus perceived and defined as a form of rational-legal authority and the standardization of work procedures is, in reality, a form of normative authority (Evetts, 2014; Alexander and Fernandez, 2021).

While most respondents did not explicitly refer to employees' ethnic background or gender in relation to professionalism, my analysis does indicate that respondents carry certain presumptions of what constitutes as professional and who embodies professionalism. There are, more specifically, three important outcomes of this study that prompt us to further analyze the impact of professionalism on what constitutes as different in the workplace. Firstly, in few occurrences, respondents did make it explicit that they found it difficult to reconcile the idea of ethnic minorities having the right professional standards, in part because they are underrepresented in certain educational tracks. Asked about the presence of ethnic minority employees, one respondent for example refers to a previous employee whose way of 'working and communicating' was not how it is done in the organization. The respondent, who is a leader of a nonprofit organization offering practice-oriented job training, concludes the following: "I can't lower my standards just because someone has another ethnic background by chance. So, I'm not going to discriminate positively, someone has to reach the standard". In this case, professionalism is explicitly associated and instilled with qualifications such as formal education and excellent knowledge of the Dutch language.

Secondly, some respondents link the 'other ethnic identity' with a particular form of professional skills that is tailored to the cultural intricacies of minority communities. They show how ethnic minority employees' cultural and embodied capital are perceived as instruments to gain organizational efficacy and enhance the organizations' ability to address specific challenges inherent to their target audience. These challenges encompass language barriers and nuanced cultural or religious differences which often eluded an effective resolution by white majority employees. The recruitment of ethnic minority employees as 'experience professionals' consequently reflects the significance of ethnic identity as a strategic resource.

The third and last outcome touches on the previous two and concerns respondents' preconceived notions of what qualifies as professional as well as paternalistic tendencies to perceive ethnic minorities solely as recipients of service provision. As mentioned in chapter four, when referring to diversity, many respondents would talk extensively about service

recipients, while narratives on workplace diversity were mainly instrumental and highlighted ethnic minorities' serviceable 'ethnocultural skills' to deal with a diversifying target group. However, I have also shown that the general recruitment of the 'ethnic other' was dependent on the organizations' willingness to change their conventional understanding of professional standards. Some respondents, for example, shared that to change the demographic composition of their organizations, they first need to create accessibility and 'lower' their standards. As such, they would resort to "not setting the bar too high" or "making an exception" in order to employ ethnic minorities.

The commonality with which respondents talked about ethnic minorities as simplified or vulnerable service recipients reveals a preconceived and narrow frame of what constitutes as professional, but also reflects a rather paternalistic view of the ethnic other. The existence of paternalism in nonprofit organizations is nothing new however, as nonprofit organizations have a historical tradition to be governed predominantly by white civic and economic actors who engage in decision making on behalf of service recipients and rarely give them a voice in determining how services are to be delivered (LeRoux, 2009b). The results of this dissertation suggest that this possibly reinforces a lack of internal and emotional consideration towards diversity and may justify approaching diversity in terms the organizations' external and material environment to ensure organizational performance (see Table 9). Moreover, according to Salamon et al. (2000), nonprofits are also inherently paternalistic because they may reinforce dependence on the part of those who rely on their services. This dependency can, in turn, be used to force those without an alternative to accept religious, moral, or political convictions they would not otherwise choose to embrace. This leads to forced conversions or the subjugation of important traditions (Salamon et al., 2000: 8). As such, paternalistic tendencies (inadvertently) reinforce hierarchical structures that hinder participation and engagement of minority employees (LeRoux, 2009b). Research has indeed shown that in the Flemish context, ethnic minority actors who hold a position in the nonprofit sector experience a paternalistic and assimilationist view of their ethnic and religious identity (Swerts et al., 2017; Elchardus et al., 2001: 171). What is moreover distinctive for Flanders' civil society, according to Huyse (2000), is that it has witnessed a historical shift of growing accountability toward the government, coupled with processes of individualization and de-pillarization. The current discourse on what constitutes as professional therefore may reflect the incremental continuity of New Public Management principles that centralize legitimation towards the government in terms performance criteria, but is furthermore also reinforced by existing, historical, political and

socio-cultural tendencies that (re)produce inequality in nonprofit organizations along ethnic lines (see also Swerts et al., 2017).

From an ethical point of view, it may seem obvious to posit that nonprofit organizations should prioritize community values above specialized knowledge and skills. However, it would be naïve and dismissive of reality to assume that organizations could discard the evolution towards more professionalization. This is not only because nonprofit organizations are subjected to the isomorphic pressures influenced by their broader institutional environment pushing forwards the need for more effective and innovative management (Stewart, 2014; Verschuere et al., 2017; Suykens et al., 2023), but also because the current continuities in the construction of New Public Management practices imposed by governments and professionalism in nonprofit contexts (Evetts, 2014; Pauly et al., 2019). Taken all together, these processes contribute to a diminishing emphasis on value transmission in favor of service provision and governmental control, consequently fostering professionalization (Huyse, 2000: 145; Pauly et al., 2021). Because of this, it would be more realistic and accurate to propose novel ways for organizations to translate their community values into the professional development of their employees, and thus blending a professionalist institutional logic with the whole organization as we have observed in one of the presented case studies. Professionalization, in this context, extends beyond technical expertise to encompass skills in fostering collective identity and values, mutual support, trust and enhance organizational performance. Organizations could for example design professional development initiatives that not only focus on technical skills but also incorporate training sessions aimed at tackling inequality (such as bystander training for example) and sensitivity to diverse perspectives. This can enable employees to leverage their professional skills while respecting and understanding the contributions of various colleagues. In this case, strategies, norms and other control mechanisms to govern workplace participations would be oriented internally and emotionally. However, and more importantly, this would require organizations to firstly assess the (normative) value they attach to 'professionalism' and how this stands in relation to their organizational objectives.

Based on the study by Verschuere et al. (2017), we can assume that nonprofit organizations perceive professionalism as an important indicator of organizational innovation and that it may therefore be important for their survival in a rapidly changing environment. Indeed, Lachapelle (2021) argues that innovation (and thus professionalism) in nonprofits is intricately linked to political goals. However, it is yet to be understood how exactly innovation and professionalism in nonprofit organizations are influenced by a performance oriented or

political imperative and how this, on its turn, affects 'diversity'. To answer this question, further research is needed on the intricacies of social innovation, professionalization and difference in nonprofit organizations.

Nonetheless, this study has shown that nonprofit organizations – if they want to be mindful of workforce diversity and at the same time unify and strengthen their organizations' logics and identity – need to foster a dual commitment to community values and professional development. This would require them to deconstruct professionalization as an occupational value, which involves critically examining and reevaluating the conventional norms and assumptions associated with what it means to be a professional within their specific context. It thus requires questioning established criteria, qualifications, and expectations of professionalism and exploring how these might inadvertently contribute to inequality. Thus, taking everything into account, I believe a fruitful attempt for nonprofit organizations to address workplace diversity lies in (i) deconstructing professionalization as an occupational value, (ii) identifying to what extent professionalism is a normative value, and thus gain insight into what and who constitutes as professional, (iii) recognizing and dismantling paternalistic inclinations and (iv) (re)considering what it means to be an innovative actor in Flanders' civil society.

The third and last recommendation I would like to put forward with the completion of this doctoral study ties in with the notion of innovation and specifically concerns the critical performativity of nonprofit organizations towards issues of diversity. Besides practicing awareness and reflexivity regarding their organizational praxis, nonprofit organizations may also put forward a more fundamental question with regard to their critical posture as civil society actors. My research, among others, suggests that organizational leaders rarely perceive diversity to be political, and even when they do, it is approached from a relativist point of view as research participants often portrayed themselves as tolerant of difference in the current societal and political climate (see also Diamanti et al., 2023). However, because diversity generally remains on the 'neutral' surface of 'being tolerant', it is largely stripped from any critical potential to structural change. Moreover, respondents in my research would even at times stigmatize and instrumentalize minority groups – as empirically experienced by myself. This seemingly apolitical and pacifist stance can be traced further back to Flanders' pillarized civil society which, according to Huyse (1970), has always been embedded in a what he refers to as a policy of pacification. Huyse (1970) more specifically argues that pacification characterized the Flemish socio-political landscape, involving extensive delegation of political power to ensure stability and effectiveness in a democratic system challenged by deep ideological divisions and factionalism. I believe that this seemingly apolitical view of

‘diversity’ is, thus, in reality, partly a continuity of nonprofit organizations as carriers of a governance discourse that is constructed around pacification, government control, performance procedures and exclusion (Shields, 2014; Pauly et al., 2021). This forces nonprofits’ diversity initiatives to focus on social impact and solutions to persistent grand challenges such as achieving representation or serving diverse communities rather than addressing structural problems and systemic change that relate to diversity.

Nonprofits, thus, largely neglect that their perspective of workplace diversity and difference are in fact continuities of the widespread polarizing (and paternalistic) rhetoric on ethnicity, migration and religion, but also of a professionalist and pacifist logic centralizing legitimation towards its external environment. The notion of ‘diversity’ consequently refers to a limited and depoliticized inclusion and is especially problematic in nonprofit organizations as it stands in stark contrast with their community values and goals. As agents of social change, nonprofits should consider to not only reflect on the values of the communities they are serving but also to take responsibility towards how they perceive certain communities *within* their organizations. The multifaceted identities – of service recipients and employees – need to be connected to ongoing systemic inequalities, not from a point of professionalization or paternalization, but from a point of ‘communitization’; that is, recognizing workforce differences as a collaborative effort to empower marginalized identities to actively participate in reshaping organizational systems, policies, and structures (Donnelly and Merrick, 2002). Such an approach goes beyond representation and involves, among other things, shared decision-making. Only then can organizations fully scrutinize their internal dynamics, power structures, and practices, ensuring that their commitment to diversity is not merely performative but translates into actively challenging systemic inequalities and attends to their social mission. In other words, by engaging critically with ‘diversity’, nonprofits can align their efforts with their broader social missions and work towards dismantling unjust systems, thereby fostering a more inclusive and equitable (civil) society.

To do so, however, also requires nonprofit scholars to develop more critical research on internal manifestations of difference and diversity in nonprofit organizations. A majority of nonprofit scholarship on workplace diversity is limited to addressing the various circumstances that allow for diversity to lead to the best possible organizational outcomes. This approach not only portrays nonprofit organizations and their characteristics as a homogenous entity, but they also remain on the surface of ‘ensuring their viability’. If nonprofit scholars want to mobilize social change, we first need to gain a better understanding of the intricacies of diversity within its broader organizations and societal context and engage with workplace diversity in constant

reflective and critical posture that aligns with the fundamental mission of nonprofits as catalysts for transformative social impact. Future research could therefore specifically address mechanisms of diversity and difference in the nonprofit workplace and how they relate to the (the possibility of undermining) organizations' goals and missions. I believe that this ultimately remains relevant in terms of viability as nonprofit employees are ideologically oriented, strongly engaged in their work and have an emotional attachment to their workplaces (Selander, 2015; Aboramadan et al., 2022). As such, a number of questions can be put forward from hereupon: How is the hybridization of diversity in nonprofit organizations performed? How is the institutional conception of diversity positioned and performed on a practical level? How can nonprofits ensure an emancipatory, transformative and servicing role as civil society actors when facing diversity? How can nonprofit organizations shift towards a logic of community building, inclusiveness, and politicization in their practices? In raising these questions, my aim is not to devaluate the work of nonprofit organizations or nonprofit scholars, but rather to spark attention to an alternative way of thinking about workplace diversity that aligns with the role of nonprofit organizations as civil society actors and calls attention to the purposive construction of detrimental social and political discourses and rationalities.

# A reflexive note

The last research question I have put forward in this dissertation addresses the issue of our understanding and assumptions about diversity and how this may affect knowledge production. In chapter four, I have partially answered this question by elaborating on how the research context was affected by essentialist categorizations and my position as an ethnic minority researcher. I have also briefly touched on the fact that diversity research itself too often draws on predetermined categories of difference. In this short and last note, I would like to expand on the latter and briefly reflect on diversity research itself and my position within this research framework.

Understanding my positionality and performative role in diversity research is not an easy endeavor, mainly because this doctoral trajectory has also been profoundly personal. In fact, I believe this is somewhat reflected in the four previous chapters. I started this dissertation, which I willingly chose and applied for, with the hope of understanding more about the emancipatory power of nonprofit organizations in addressing diversity related issues. My choice to study diversity from this angle as an ethnic minority is not surprising of course. I was drawn to and personally empowered by a research stream that aimed to identify, destabilize, and deconstruct dominant power relations across ethnic lines. I believe this choice on itself already strongly reflects my need to continuously navigate my own identity as an ethnic minority in a dominant cultural context. What I hoped to understand through this dissertation is how can nonprofits in particular, organization of which we in good faith believe advocate for a more righteous, fair and equal society, also (co)construct power in terms of 'diversity'. This critical and normative question, essentially, was the starting point of my dissertation.

As a novice academic doing research on an increasingly polarized and controversial topic and a first-time insider to the world of nonprofit organizations, I often time felt powerless and unable to identify and translate some of the problematic encounters I have had. In the first interview round I was directly confronted with essentializing discourses of leaders and unfortunately, as well as with my own way of dealing with this; becoming an 'obedient', young researcher who was particularly afraid to upset anyone but was left nonetheless weary. Even though my data would have probably benefitted from more provoking in-depth interviews, I had little energy and confidence to elaborate and further question respondents' essentialist and stigmatizing discourse which reveals a first important epistemological challenge for 'diverse' diversity researchers.

While it is easily and quickly discernable to see the ways respondents addressed my ethnic minority background, I am also left quite puzzled at the end of this trajectory with regard to my own relation vis-à-vis the research field. This is because I have become the subject of my own research in not only the relationship with respondents but also in relation to the field of diversity research where I believe inequalities are also palpable for the so-called diversity subjects. I have, thus, gradually come to realize that there is a second epistemological challenge for diversity researchers which relates to my engagement with the academic field. As already mentioned in the introductory chapter of this dissertation, diversity (management) research oftentimes theoretically and empirically turns to categorization to understand nuances within diversity or 'difference' (Villesèche et al., 2018b), leaving ethnic or religious minorities for example with fixed conceptualizations of their own identity. The pervasive approach of categorization in diversity research positions me, as an ethnic minority, within this predefined category and has left me feeling constrained and even weighted down at times. As I delved into diversity research, I was faced with the notion of 'the ethnic minority' who is always in need of being placed in a profitable position, whether that is monetary or moral. The 'ethnic minority' thus falls under scrutiny as a category that should be deemed important, but its importance relies mainly on the performative use of scholars who take this 'ethnic minority' as a given. This feeling I encountered has been aptly explained by (Ahonen and Tienari, 2015: 16) who describe this characteristic of diversity research as the following:

> The object, the diverse subject, is observed from afar by a meta-subject that is never named. They have their difference cast upon them through diversity knowledge and management practices and they are required to self-declare their difference.

This is not to say that critical diversity scholarship itself is inherently problematic of course; rather, it is crucial for understanding the dynamics of privilege, inequality, and representation. However, it may be that diversity research has itself become a means for perpetuating inequality under the pretext of improving the representation of 'the diversity subject' and is therefore blind to *who* these subjects are. Just like nonprofit organizations, diversity scholars, therefore, need to be attentive to their own (increasingly neoliberal) environment that is similarly imposing an exclusive, individualized focus on predefined identity categories which neglect the multiplicity of employees' identities and experiences. This, for Greedharry et al. (2021), is an important reason for diversity scholars to not only thoroughly analyze how and under what conditions inequalities operate in organizations but also in research on diversity and its management.

Besides navigating through the imbalanced dynamics I encountered with respondents during this doctoral trajectory, I therefore also needed to embark on a personal journey of challenging and transcending these categorizations for myself. What has made me the subject of my own research, then, is my own ways of needing to reject and modify this position I was assigned to by various institutions. It forced me to see myself as more than only an ethnic minority researcher. I believe that this has also informed my choice to follow suit of several prominent diversity and identity scholars in arguing that our sense of 'who we are' is not only shaped by the power relationships we are subject to but also by the intricate interplay between personal, social, and organizational factors and the ways we negotiate our identities within this context (see chapter three).

If 'who I am' is shaped by these relations, then I am also compelled to gaze at my position as a researcher within the academic world and the potential consequences. Sadly, but luckily, the biggest and yet simplest lesson I have had to learn during this trajectory is that, contrary to what teachers, respondents or researchers have been holding before me for most of my life, my own identity is complex and multifaceted, influenced by various interrelated contexts and that I am not merely an 'ethnic minority' that is downplayed by powerful forces. Writing down this dissertation has therefore also been my attempt at negotiating my identity within the academic context.

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# Appendices

# Appendix I
# Letter of invitation

Beste,

Ik mail u naar aanleiding van een onderzoek waar ik recent mee ben gestart. Ik ben verbonden aan de onderzoekgroep Centre for Research on Social and Environmental Change (Universiteit Antwerpen) als doctoraal onderzoeker waarbij ik mij focus op het thema diversiteit in Vlaamse non-profitorganisaties. Meer specifiek is het doel om na te gaan hoe verschillende welzijns- en sociaal-culturele organisaties aankijken tegen personeelsdiversiteit en welke ideeën, strategieën, praktijken en/of projecten daarbij belangrijk worden geacht. Mijn studie bouwt daarmee onder meer verder op het CSI Flanders onderzoeksproject, dat de uitdagingen van het Vlaams middenveld in kaart bracht en waaraan uw organisatie deelnam.

In het kader van deze studie zal ik interviews afnemen in de periode van september – december 2020 met leidinggevenden (directeurs, coördinatoren, verantwoordelijken) van verschillende organisaties die mij hier meer over willen vertellen. Ik zou daarbij heel graag [organisatie X] willen betrekken en vroeg mij daarom af of het mogelijk zou zijn om in de komende weken eens samen te zitten voor een interview met één van jullie leidinggevenden? Dit zou ongeveer een uur duren.

Verder zou ik u alvast willen geruststellen dat de anonimiteit van de participanten en organisatie wordt gegarandeerd en het onderzoek werd goedgekeurd door de ethische commissie via de Universiteit Antwerpen en het Fonds Wetenschappelijk Onderzoek. De uiteindelijk beslissing omtrent de participatie ligt uiteraard bij uw organisatie en u als directeur. Omdat dit onderzoek eventueel ook voor jullie relevante inzichten kan bieden, ben ik zeker bereid om de onderzoeksresulaten met jullie te delen.

Indien er nog vragen zijn kan u mij altijd contacteren via onderstaande contactgegevens. Ik kijk alvast uit naar uw antwoord.

Warme groet,

Sara Elloukmani

# Appendix II

## Ethical clearance forms

**Inlichtingenblad**

Geachte deelnemer,

Binnen een onderzoek rond diversiteit in nonprofit organisaties verzamel ik informatie over het diversiteitsbeleid van uw organisatie. Dit onderzoek kadert binnen mijn doctoraatsstudies. De focus zal hierbij liggen op de manier waarop nonprofit organisaties trachten om te gaan met diversiteit en hoe dit door leidinggevenden ervaren en gepercipieerd wordt. Samen met tientallen anderen, zal u geïnterviewd worden. Dit interview zal (volledig anoniem) opgenomen en uitgeschreven worden in functie van het onderzoek. Dit zal met niemand gedeeld worden. Voor verdere vragen, kan u altijd contact opnemen met behulp van onderstaande contactgegevens.

Met het bijgevoegde toestemmingsformulier vragen we de expliciete toestemming om het verzamelde materiaal te gebruiken.

Alvast hartelijk dank voor uw deelname.

Sara Elloukmani

Promotor : Peter Raeymaeckers

Co-promotor : Stijn Oosterlynck

Voor meer informatie over het onderzoek kan u mij altijd contacteren via onderstaande contactgegevens.

**Sara Elloukmani**
Faculteit Sociale Wetenschappen
Stadscampus – Z.510
Kipdorp 61 – 2000 Antwerp
sara.elloukmani@uantwerpen.be
T +32 3 265 42 15
M +32 485 832 447

**Toestemmingsformulier**

Geachte,

We namen contact met u om mee te doen aan een onderzoek van de Universiteit van Antwerpen. Meer informatie over het onderzoek kan u vinden in het bijgevoegde inlichtingenblad.
Hierbij maken we volgende afspraken met u:

1. U hebt voldoende en duidelijke informatie over het onderzoek gekregen zodanig dat u kunt beslissen om wel of niet mee te doen.
2. Deelname aan dit onderzoek is geheel vrijwillig.
3. De gegevens die we van u krijgen zullen alleen voor dit onderzoek gebruikt worden.
4. Alle informatie zal geanonimiseerd worden.
5. U kunt op ieder moment beslissen om alsnog uit het onderzoek te stappen.

Deelnemer: Naam: ………………………………..…………………..

Voornaam: ………………………………..…………………..

Datum: …….. / ……… / .........

Handtekening:

# Appendix III

## Questionnaire round 1

**Part I: Opening questions**

1. Can you tell me more about yourself?
2. How did you come to be a part of the organization?
    - ◊ What education and previous jobs were important in this journey?
3. Can you tell me more about your organization? How does it operate?
4. What is your role? How do you relate to your colleagues?
5. What is the biggest challenge for your organization today?

**Part II: Core themes**

Diversity policies and practices in the organization

1. What does diversity mean to you? How would you define diversity? Feel free to answer from your personal experiences with diversity.
2. When did you first encounter ethnic and cultural diversity?
3. How would you describe your organization's vision regarding ethnic and cultural diversity?
    - ◊ Why does your organization consider diversity important?
    - ◊ How does ethnic and cultural diversity contribute to fulfilling the social mission of your organization?
    - ◊ To what extent do you agree with this vision?
4. Does your organization have someone employed to develop or implement diversity-related activities or measures?
5. Does your organization have a diversity policy?
    - ◊ Since when? How did it come about?
    - ◊ What is the ultimate goal of this policy?
    - ◊ Who contributed to its development?
    - ◊ How is it evaluated?
6. Are the employees aware of this policy?
7. How did you experience the changes within the organization when implementing these activities/measures?

- ◊ What, in your opinion, went well/did not go well?
- ◊ Can you tell me more about how you chose these activities/measures?
- ◊ Who or what was consulted for this purpose (workshops, acquaintances, experts, other organizations...)?
- ◊ What have you personally learned from this?

Presence of diversity in the workplace

8. To what extent does your organization succeed in achieving ethnic and cultural diversity with the current diversity policy and actions?
9. Have you experienced difficulties in recruiting ethnic and cultural minorities within the organization?
    - ◊ Can you tell me more about that?
    - ◊ In your opinion, what was the cause?
    - ◊ If it's related to vacancies, competencies, specific preferences related to cultural or religious matters, what is your organization's policy on this? How do you feel about it?
10. Are ethnic and cultural minorities overrepresented in a specific type of job within your organization?
    - ◊ What is the nature of this job? Why do you think this is the case?
11. Have you, as a leader, experienced difficulties between different groups in your organization? How did you deal with it?

Perception of diversity in the organization

12. Do you feel that the organization takes into account the views of employees with an ethnic and cultural background?
    - ◊ How does this happen in your opinion?
    - ◊ How do the aforementioned practices/measures/policies contribute to this?
    - ◊ What is the most important reason for you to do this? Are there other reasons?
13. Since becoming a leader in your organization, has your organization changed significantly in terms of diversity?
    - ◊ How do you experience these changes?

- ◊ How has your thinking about diversity evolved?
- ◊ How has your role in the organization played a role in this?

Relationship with other organizations and policy

14. Does your organization take a societal position regarding practices related to ethnic and cultural diversity?
    - ◊ If so, how? Public or behind the scenes?
    - ◊ Who do you take this position to? (supporters, policies, other organizations, the broader public)
15. Is your organization addressed about diversity?
    - ◊ By local or regional policy?
    - ◊ By other organizations?
    - ◊ By supporters?
    - ◊ By the broader public?
16. How do you think the current local and regional policy stands regarding ethnic and cultural diversity?
    - ◊ To what extent is your organization encouraged by your (local) government to focus on diversity?
    - ◊ In what way? (Are there subsidies involved?)
    - ◊ Do you think this is a positive thing?
    - ◊ If not, do you think your (local) government should invest in this? Why or why not?
17. Is diversity something you discuss with other organizations or look to other organizations for?
18. Have you noticed anything about diversity (practices, measures, outcomes) in other organizations?
    - ◊ What do you like about it?
    - ◊ What do you not like about it?
    - ◊ Which organizations are you referring to?
    - ◊ Have you exchanged information with other organizations when it comes to diversity (practices)?
19. How does your organization compare to other organizations in terms of diversity?

20. Do you think diversity within your organization can offer an advantage in relation to other organizations in your network?
    - ◊ Can you tell me more about that?
    - ◊ How do you think other organizations in your network view diversity?
    - ◊ Can you provide a concrete example?

**Part III: Conclusion**

1. After this conversation, are there any lingering thoughts for you?
2. Do you think diversity is a challenge in the welfare sector?
    - ◊ What is the greatest benefit of diversity in your opinion?

# Appendix IV
# Questionnaire round 2

**Part I: Opening questions**

1. Can you tell me more about yourself?
2. How did you come to be a part of the organization?
   - ◊ What education and previous jobs were important in this journey?
3. What is your professional role? How do you relate to your colleagues?

**Part II: Core themes**

1. Your organization has an extensive diversity policy. How are you connected to diversity?
   - ◊ What does diversity mean to you?
2. In what ways have you encountered diversity within the organization?
   - ◊ If applicable, what does it mean to you to be a person from a minority group within the organization?
   - ◊ If applicable, is there an aspect of your identity (gender, ethnic background, religion, sexual orientation, etc.) that stands out more prominently within the organization?
   - ◊ In your opinion, is being part of a minority group an asset to the organization?
3. How, in your opinion, does the organization address diversity?
   - ◊ a. Are you aware of diversity-related policies?
   - ◊ b. What diversity practices are implemented?
   - ◊ c. Why do you think these practices are important?
4. Do you perceive diversity to be a challenging issue within the organization?
   - ◊ Why or why not?
5. Do you consider [the organization] to be a diverse organization?
   - ◊ On what basis do you form that opinion?
   - ◊ Why do you think there is little or a lot of diversity in [organization]?
6. Would you describe [the organization] as an inclusive organization as well?
   - ◊ Based on what criteria?

**Part II: Conclusion**

1. Do you have any thoughts about our conversation?
2. Do you find (talking about) diversity challenging?

# Appendix V
# Author contributions

**Chapter 1: Diversifying the workplace in nonprofit organizations: discourses and perspectives on ethnic diversity**

Sara Elloukmani: Preparing research, data collection, data analysis, drafting and revising of the manuscript.

Stijn Oosterlynck: Feedback on the study, contribution theoretical framework, critical revision of the manuscript.

Peter Raeymaeckers: Feedback on the study, contribution theoretical framework, critical revision of the manuscript.

**Chapter 2: Understanding diversity in nonprofit organizations: an institutional logics perspective**

Sara Elloukmani: Preparing research, data collection, data analysis, drafting and revising of the manuscript.

Peter Raeymaeckers: Feedback on the study, contribution theoretical framework, critical revision of the manuscript.

Stijn Oosterlynck: Feedback on the study, contribution theoretical framework, critical revision of the manuscript.

**Chapter 3: Making differences (in)visible: Identity work and power dynamics in welfare organizations in Belgium**

Sara Elloukmani: Preparing research, data collection, data analysis, drafting and revising of the manuscript.

Lore Van Praag: Feedback on the study, critical revision of the manuscript.

Stijn Oosterlynck: Feedback on the study, critical revision of the manuscript.

**Chapter 4: Navigating essentialism in qualitative research on diversity: reflections of an ethnic minority researcher**

Sara Elloukmani: Preparing research, data collection, data analysis, drafting and revising of the manuscript.

# Appendix VI
# Dutch abstract

De afgelopen decennia heeft het middenveld aanzienlijk terrein gewonnen in termen van hun maatschappelijke en economische belang. Als onmisbare aanbieders van sociale en culturele diensten dragen ze significant bij aan de totale werkgelegenheid en het creëeren van sociaal en economisch kapitaal. Desalniettemin wijst onderzoek uit dat de samenstelling van personeelsbestanden van nonprofit organisaties grotendeels gestratificeerd is op basis van etnische, gender- en sociaal-klassenverschillen, een bevinding die in schril contrast staat met de positie van nonprofits als pleitbezorgers van burgerparticipatie en maatschappelijk engagement.

In dit proefschrift onderzoek ik hoe diversiteit op de werkvloer wordt ingezet in Vlaamse nonprofit organisaties. In Vlaanderen wordt de nonprofit sector voornamelijk gekenmerkt door een scheve vertegenwoordiging in het personeelsbestand op het gebied van etnische verschillen. Voortbouwend op inzichten uit kritische en poststructuralistische diversiteitsstudies beoogt dit proefschrift bij te dragen aan de literatuur door de processen te onderzoeken die verschillen binnen nonprofit organisaties tot stand brengen. De manieren waarop differentiatie in termen van 'diversiteit' plaatsvindt, is sterk verankerd in de kenmerken van nonprofit organisaties en de positionering van de betrokken actoren. Om die reden benadruk ik enerzijds de specificiteit van de sector en ontrafel ik hoe diversiteit wordt geconceptualiseerd en gemobiliseerd, hoe het wordt geïntegreerd en aangepast in organisatorische omgevingen, en hoe het verband houdt met de constructie van individuele identiteiten binnen de organisatorische context. Door de nadruk te leggen op de rol van de context en de situationele aard van identiteiten, komt dit proefschrift bovendien tegemoet aan uitdagingen in de wetenschappelijke literatuur rond diversiteit.

Op basis van diepte-interviews met leidinggevenden en werknemers van nonprofit organisaties, toont mijn analyse aan dat diversiteit niet per se door een management discours wordt gestuurd, zoals vaak wordt aangenomen in bestaande literatuur, maar eerder sterk verweven is met de governance mechanismen van nonprofit organisaties. Een diepgaande narratieve analyse van twee welzijnsorganisaties onthult bovendien het bredere institutionele kader waarin diversiteit wordt geïntroduceerd en geïmplementeerd in de organisatie. Dit stelt ons op zijn beurt in staat te begrijpen waarom verschillen worden geconstrueerd als vooraf bepaald en gecentreerd rond etnische en religieuze verschillen, of als zelfgeïnformeerd en

gecentreerd rond meervoudige en dynamische identiteiten. Deze uiteenlopende en contextueel afhankelijke interpretaties van diversiteit hebben belangrijke gevolgen voor hoe identiteiten op de werkvloer worden onderhandeld en hoe macht wordt gevestigd binnen die context. Het centrale uitgangspunt van dit proefschrift is dat de context een cruciale rol speelt in termen van macht en geldt als een belangrijke voorwaarde voor de totstandkoming van bepaalde verschillen.