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The Social Construction of Workplace "Diversity"

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The Social Construction of Workplace "Diversity"

by

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
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College of Arts and Sciences
University of South Florida

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ABSTRACT

This is a study of “workplace diversity” from a social constructionist perspective. The perspective holds that while human meaning is socially created, it is the social order which gives us resources for making this meaning. There is much literature about workplace diversity from objectivist standpoints that takes for granted the term “diversity.” What is missing is a comprehensive understanding of diversity: what does this term mean? What does it conceal? I attempt to contribute to a better understanding of diversity by interrogating its construction in popular culture.

I analyze the content of an advertising supplement called “Diversity Works,” published in the *New York Times Sunday Magazine*, with a literal read to learn how diversity is manifestly constructed on the surface as well as how it is typified through formula stories. Diversity is ideally defined as programs for creating a “culture of

inclusion,” but practical efforts imply normative attempts to assimilate persons designated as diverse to the standards imposed by the dominant group.

I argue that claims about diversity act to construct collective identity for certain types of people thereby reinforcing their subordinate positions among the social hierarchy. As constructed, the social goodness of diversity is taken for granted, yet by its narrow typification reproduces race and gender divisions and accompanying inequalities. In practice, diversity is an alternate term for the other, the type of person who is not a member of the highly valued and socially privileged dominant group of white (Anglo) men. I suggest that diversity is linked to larger structures of domination evidenced by its construction as agents of social engineering existing to help certain types of people – women and minorities.

My analysis offers potential contributions to diversity scholarship by attending to issues of power and dominance as they are constructed and interpreted in popular culture. Further, I contribute to a dialogue about power and dominance relations between identity groups. Finally, this study contributes to empirical work on the issues of socialization in the workplace. As constructed, diversity programs invoke the ideal of respecting difference in persons while coordinating sameness in behavior for the benefit of capitalist expansion.

Chapter One

Introduction

“Diversity Works

Diversity means many things to many people – *but one thing is certain. Creating a culture of inclusion that celebrates and leverages diverse perspectives – from race, gender, age, language and country of origin to educational background, sexual orientation and physical disabilities – is a central objective of the country’s most forward-thinking organizations* (New York Times, September 14, 2003; emphasis original).

“Diversity”, or more specifically, “Workplace Diversity”, is a topic that piques my sociological imagination for a number of reasons. I was an employee for a large organization in which I assumed the role of Diversity Champion for my department. I served on the Diversity Council of this organization and was being considered for certification as a Diversity Trainer. The goals of this program were to create a dialogue among groups of different people. The rhetoric was about eliminating stereotypes so people who are different from each other can work more effectively together, in order to stem conflicts that arise among workers in the course of task performance on the job.

Because I was working full-time and going to graduate school part-time, I began with a research interest in evaluating the diversity program itself. My original plan was to do a pre-test/post-test design to assess how participation in the diversity seminar affected attitudes and work experiences among my company's employees. However, in my day-to-day experience in this company, I encountered what I experienced as contradictions and hypocrisy with respect to the rhetoric or persuasive language (Nelson-Rowe 1995) of diversity which led me to a prior question: It was my experience that diversity and its programs apply to some – but not all – varieties of human diversity. So, what, or more appropriately who is included when we say diversity and who is not?

Hence, my tack on diversity research changed from assessing its effectiveness from an objective standpoint to trying to understand the social construct itself. What *is* diversity? In the process of reorganizing my research, I saw an advertising supplement published by the *New York Times (NYT)* on September 14, 2003 titled “Diversity Works.” While I originally thought this would be only one of several forms of data I would use to explore the social construction of diversity, the depth of discourse in the advertisement was so rich that it became my only source of data for this analysis of the rhetoric of diversity. Here, I want to emphasize that it is not my aim to extrapolate my lived experience to comment on in-house practices of private companies, but feel it necessary to establish how my interest in the topic was born.

I begin with some fundamentals of the theoretical perspective of social constructionism, which is the primary framework for the analysis that follows. Social constructionism is concerned primarily with how we know what we know. Grounded in phenomenology and ethnomethodology (Loseke 2003), this theoretical perspective

encourages us to examine how human meaning is both created and maintained in what is an historical, philosophical and inherently political process. Furthermore, constructionism considers the social resources that provide the context for such meaning. More generally, its analysis contributes to the larger field within the empirical discipline of sociology, the sociology of knowledge (Berger and Luckmann 1966), which is concerned with “the relationship between human thought and the social context within which it arises” (Berger and Luckmann 1966, p. 4).

Social constructionism allows us to examine how meaning is created in everyday life and encourages our interrogation into elements of our social life that are instrumental in that creation. The foundations of knowledge in everyday life (Berger and Luckmann 1966) are created with and through our interactions. These interactions are the topics to be explored. Or, as noted by Berger and Luckmann (1966, p. 19) “Everyday life presents itself as a reality interpreted by men and subjectively meaningful to them as a coherent world. As sociologists we take this reality as the object of our analyses.”

Central to the framework of social constructionism is *how* we understand our world (Loseke 2003). It concerns how we categorize our world and how we attach labels that serve to distinguish “types of things or types of people” (Loseke 2003, p. 14). The significance of categorization goes beyond knowing what to call something, or how to refer to someone – it instructs us how to act, how to behave toward those things and people. “Constructionist perspectives encourage us to take words seriously because even the most simple words (*particularly* the most simple words) are categories for *entire systems of meaning* (Loseke 2003, p. 16 emphasis in original). This perspective assumes that we categorize things and people in order to organize and simplify our complex world

(Loseke 2003). We categorize by similarity, by what we deem typical. We know what we know through *typification* (Loseke 2003).

Typifications are defined in interactions be they face-to-face, or textually mediated and are culturally situated. That is, social constructions are comprised of claims or rhetoric which are created and distributed by claims-makers and are evaluated by audiences in relation to the extent that such claims resonate with culturally held beliefs (Loseke 2003). We learn about typifications through a variety of claims that are verbal, visual and/or behavioral (Loseke 2003). We learn about typifications through storytelling or in the lexicon of social constructionism – formula stories. “Social problems formula stories are narratives about types of experiences involving distinctive types of characters” (Loseke 2003, p. 89). They are evaluated by audience members through practical experience, cultural themes, and feeling rules (Loseke 2003).

Data

I begin from my personal experience with “diversity,” or what Randall Collins (2000) might refer to as “the ground zero” for empirical study to examine the construct as it is defined in popular culture. My main interest is in how the concept diversity is constructed for public consumption. More specifically, how diversity is defined in an advertising supplement published by the *New York Times*.

I use the term popular culture as defined in *The Press and Popular Culture* by Conboy (2002, p. 8) who writes:

Popular culture works as a discourse in that it provides a framework of expectations, which allows an idealized version of the ordinary people to emerge.

Popular newspapers are potent factors in this normative process as they build upon these discourses of the people and can target them emotionally, economically and politically, claiming to speak on their behalf.

Conboy discusses the power of the popular press and its hegemony in perpetuating popular culture. “A popular press does not only address the people themselves, but places that address within the dominant economic structures of society since to a large extent the categorization of the ordinary people takes place in terms of their relative economic marginalization” (Conboy 2002, p. 16). He further asserts that it is the popular newspaper that is among the most “productive sites” in the “creation of popular identities within the rhetoric of popular cultural forms (Conboy 2002, p. 17).

This brings us to a discussion of the source of my data – the *New York Times* (*NYT*) and its role in the creation of identities. Scholars have noted the importance of the *NYT*. In “Discovering the News,” for example, Schudson writes, “The *World* may have set the pace for modern mass-circulation journalism, but after 1896 the *New York Times* established the standard” (Schudson 1978, p. 106). Schudson also refers to the influence of *NYT* with respect to its target audience – the wealthy, the near wealthy and the wish to be wealthy. “Nor did there seem to be much question about the source of the *Times*’ influence: wealthy people read the *Times*, attracted by its conservatism, decency, and accuracy” (Schudson 1978, p. 107). Further, Schudson argues that the sphere of influence extends beyond the affluent on the basis of the *NYT* social reputation.

There is, then, a moral dimension to the reading of different kinds of newspapers; there is pride and shame in reading. This helps establish the plausibility of the hypothesis that the *Times*’ readership was not won simply by the utility of the

articles it printed for businessmen and lawyers or the resonance of its political outlook with the politics of affluent readers. The *Times* attracted readers among the wealthy and among those aspiring to wealth and status, in part, because it was socially approved. It was itself a badge of respectability” (Schudson 1978, p. 117).

By virtue of the fact that *NYT* continues to be among the top ranked newspapers in the U.S. in terms of mass-circulation (editorandpublisher.com, 11/03), it maintains its status as the standard for newspapers.

My data are from an advertising supplement in the *NYT*. Although editors disclaim its content as not involving the “reporting or editing staff” of the *NYT*, the *NYT* is itself one of the organizational sponsors of the supplement and thereby contributes both directly and indirectly to the rhetoric of the diversity construct. More importantly, whether the discourse can be examined as propaganda, ideology, science or news, the social constructionist perspective holds that it represents knowledge – *meaning* (Berger and Luckmann 1966). I justify my data as a cultural artifact from the “world’s most influential” newspaper – a source of claims that contribute to our popular understanding of diversity. What interests me is not only what is included, but also what is excluded when the word diversity and its forms are invoked and how power and social hierarchy are reproduced in the process.

Method of Analysis

The twenty-five page supplement is crafted in a way that first sets the editorial tone via an Introduction, which begins “Diversity means many things to many people.” The theme of the introduction suggests that diversity encompasses many identities, and the introduction spells out specific categories that include “diverse perspectives,” “race,” “gender,” “age,” “language,” “country of origin,” “educational background,” “sexual orientation,” and “physical disabilities.” Following the introduction are 11 business cases of diversity from specific named corporations. Each contains a Profile in Diversity or testimonial in which the characteristics of a particular employee can be read as typifying or giving character to diversity. Following these business cases, there is an interview, in question and answer format, with agents of the Federal Government. The supplement ends with a summary of the Proprietary Research commissioned by the New York Times Company and conducted on its behalf by the Beta Research Corporation. This is presented as a summary of findings regarding diversity in the workplace.

My analysis strategy was to perform several readings in order to interpret the mythologies transmitted in the rhetoric of diversity. I refer to Barthes (1982) ideas regarding mythologies as systems of meaning, which are neither true nor false. First, I took an analytical or literal approach in which I focused on the mythical speech of diversity. According to Barthes (1982, p. 110); “Mythical speech is made of a material which has *already* been worked on so as to make it suitable for communication: it is because all the materials of myth (whether pictorial or written) presuppose a signifying consciousness, that one can reason about them while discounting their substance” (emphasis in original). I counted the number of times diversity appeared in the document

and attempted to distinguish its meaning and referents as a way of letting the concept “fill the form” (Barthes 1982). To accomplish this, I typed the entire text into a word processing document in order to facilitate word searches as well as the ability to cut and paste references to diversity into a spreadsheet. This enabled me to organize the content by themes. In cutting the diversity references out of context, this approach has the effect of “destroying the myth” by “making its intention obvious, or by unmasking it.” Barthes (1982, p. 128).

I read the supplement a second time for constructions of person types. Here I examined references to the categories of diversity that are stated in the introduction to the supplement (“diverse perspectives,” “race,” “gender,” “age,” “language,” “country of origin,” “educational background,” “sexual orientation,” and “physical disabilities.”) I regard some analytic issues posed by O’Barr (1994) which show how advertising constructs “idealized images of people, depicts their patterns of interacting with others, and positions them in the social hierarchy” (O’Barr 1994, p. 3). The construction of person types or “collective identities” (Loseke 2003) becomes clear in this reading. What are conspicuous by absence are references to categories of “dominant group ethnic identity” (Doane 1997), as well as references to other ethnic groups or “out” groups, arguably those who have yet to become “serious contenders for power positions in North American organizations” (Konrad 2003, p. 4).

In this document analysis I focus on the “language of claims-making” (Spencer 2000) and how claims are linked to the larger cultural context. My data of text excerpts appear in italics setting them apart from theoretical references. I ground my observations within the field of sociology in general and social constructionism in particular. I also include references to scholars of cultural studies, organizational psychology, group and organization management and mass media, but contain the bulk of my analytical references within the realm of the constructionist perspective.

Chapter Two

Historical Context of Diversity as an Objective Condition

In this paper, I analyze the construct of diversity from a social constructionist perspective, which situates the interest in subjective concern. However, I feel it is necessary to comment on the construct in terms of its historical context. As such, this chapter concerns diversity as an objective condition with objective indicators. The extent to which my subjective analysis leads me to contextualize the concept of workplace diversity and its training programs as stemming from a long history of attempts to manage good workers necessitates a brief discussion of how it is linked to other similar managerial directives. Further, by conceptualizing diversity first as an objective condition with historical roots provides a natural launch to its examination with a subjective lens. As Loseke (2003, p. 8) writes: “While it makes sense to examine social problems as objective conditions involving flesh and blood people, we cannot stop there because it is *not* enough. Social problems are about things and people we *worry* about, and when we talk about ‘worry’ we go beyond objectivity into *subjective definitions*” (emphasis in original).

Konrad (2003) traces the historical growth of diversity as a “business case,” the study of which “crystallized as a management subfield in the late 1980s” following the

publication of the Hudson Institute's paper titled "Workforce 2000: Work and Workers in the 21st Century." Konrad (2003, p. 5) cites three claims about the importance of diversity from a business perspective:

First...a more diverse U.S. labor force means that businesses desiring to attract and retain the highest quality talent will have to recruit from all demographic categories as the traditional White male demographic shrinks in relative size.

Second, a more diverse U.S. society plus a globalized marketplace means a more diverse customer base, and businesses that employ a more diverse workforce will garner market intelligence to help them sell to potential customers from a variety of cultural backgrounds. Third, demographically diverse groups can outperform homogeneous groups on problem-solving and creativity tasks because diverse groups contain a greater variety of information, experience, perspectives, and cognitive styles.

As earlier stated, objective conditions are defined by objective indicators. The Society for Human Resource Management, 1997 (cited in Konrad 2003, p. 5) reports, "...by 1997, 75% of Fortune 500 organizations had diversity management programs." The crux of Konrad's argument is that while the "business case" appealed to the interests of the powerful, it is not only limited in its attempts to promote equality for "historically excluded groups," but perpetuates "power/dominance relations between identity groups."

While diversity programs are relatively new in organizational practice, they can be understood as direct descendants of previous efforts to socially engineer harmonious interaction between different kinds of people. Kanter (1993, p. 18) summarizes the development of managerial ideologies from the time when large corporations began to

“emerge as dominant organizational form in the decades between 1890 and 1910.” From interorganizational and functional consolidation, which inspired “the tools, techniques, and functions of management” to the actual development of early management theory, which “developed rationality as the central ideal of the organization and the special province of managers;” Kanter discusses management development and its role in the rise of the more modern movement of human relations.

When human relations theory filtered into the management level of corporations in the form of sensitivity training groups in the late 1950s and 1960s, it coexisted alongside theories and techniques for rational decision-making. Sensitivity groups were considered a vehicle for learning about relationships so as to master, not unleash, emotional factors counter-productive to the organization (Kanter 1993, p. 24).

The historical development of management points to the functional hierarchy that continues to exist in modern organizations. Namely – those who manage, and those who will be managed – arguably, dominant and subordinate groups, respectively. Scholars have argued that those who are among the managerial elite are necessarily a homogeneous group due to business factors that require a certain degree of predictability among decision-makers. Kanter (1993) names “uncertainty, discretion and the need for trust” as variables that reflect homogeneity among managers.

Kanter reports (1993, p. 53):

The lack of structure in top jobs makes it very important for decision-makers to work together closely in at least the harmony of shared understanding and a degree of mutual trust...the solidarity that can be mustered through common membership in social networks, and the social control this provides, is a helpful supplement for decision-makers.

Noble (1982) argues that the uncertainty of individual action and response in organizations has complicated efforts to generate consistency and efficiency since the emergence of the first corporations. Noble (1982) identifies four historical currents that have given rise to the “social force of modern management” one of which he identifies as “the man problem.” Noble writes, “The third, which emerged as an aspect of and in resistance to the first two, was the intensifying “man problem”- the need to discipline and motivate labor, and neutralize opposition which thwarted efficient production, challenged the inevitability of capitalist industrial development, and threatened corporate stability” (Noble 1982, p. 259). I contend that diversity programs exist to oppose the threat to corporate stability by requiring minorities to conform to the ways of the majority.

Indeed, Rose’s (1996, p. 131) ideas suggest that diversity programs are among “practices for acting upon the conduct of persons” within the organization – to deal with, as Noble puts it, “the man problem.” Rose offers a framework and methodology for investigating such practices which he suggests are “seeking to render these problems intelligible and, at the same time, manageable” (Rose 1996, p. 131). Within this, I argue that diversity training can be understood as a manifestation of government arising out of problematizing the situation of a diverse workforce that requires strategies for the

conduct of conduct (Rose 1996). “Perhaps one could say that the general strategic field of all those programmes of government that regard themselves as liberal has been defined by the problem of how free individuals can be governed such that they enact their freedom appropriately” (Rose 1996, p. 134). With this I suggest that by constructing diversity as an intelligible “thing” is to make it manageable. Diversity programs are not constructed in business for fun and recreation or to necessarily to build harmony among diverse individuals. They are constructed to further the aims of capitalists and hence are constructed in ways that maintain the existing social hierarchy of those who manage and those who will be managed. It is this construction to which we now turn.

The historical context of diversity and its programs is a useful launch to examine diversity as it is currently constructed in an advertising supplement in the *NYT*. Because it is this history that provides the patterns of discourse that are carried in social constructions – “historical descriptions are necessarily ordered by the present state of knowledge, they increase with every transformation and never cease, in turn, to break with themselves...” (Foucault 1972, p. 5). The current rhetoric not only draws upon, but also further exploits the ideas that have become resources for our interpretation of efforts to control workers at the behest of managers. Essentially, these programs can be conceptualized as serving initiatives for the control of individual uncertainty and, as constructed, invoke the ideal of respecting difference in persons while coordinating sameness in behavior for the benefit of capitalist expansion.

Chapter Three

Constructing the Meaning of Diversity as a Subjective Condition

Constructionists have noted the importance of language and storytelling in providing explanation and understanding of our social world. Language “objectifies” and “expands;” it “typifies” and “anonymizes” (Berger and Luckmann 1966). “Because of its capacity to transcend the ‘here and now,’ language bridges different zones within the reality of everyday life and integrates them into a meaningful whole” (Berger and Luckmann 1966, p. 39). Language is constructive. It uses vocabulary, grammar, classification schemes, and numbers as materials to build meaning. I begin with a question: What does diversity mean in everyday life? Then, proceed more specifically: How is diversity constructed in the *NYT* supplement – which can be read as a story or narrative about diversity?

The narrative of diversity is a formula story complete with a plot, characters and an underlying moral point. The narrative of the diversity story is told through a combination of personal testimonials, statistics and research results by several organizational sponsors or claims-makers. The story begins with a positive statement: “Diversity Works” and then proceeds with 25 pages that construct what, why and how diversity works. In this chapter, I discuss what diversity is, why diversity is important

and how diversity is accomplished as it is socially constructed in one document. I refer to the social construction of diversity via the lexicon of the social construction of social problems, but that is not to suggest that diversity is constructed as problematic. Indeed, its construction can be interpreted as a solution to problems. However, I contend that by its construction as a condition with solutions, diversity is “problemetized” (Rose 1996).

Several claims-making strategies have been identified as effective in establishing parameters or the grounds of a condition with the aim of persuading audience members to believe and support the claims being made. “Claims-makers construct the *grounds* of a social problem condition when they define it, and when they specify the harm and the number of victims it creates” (Loseke 2003, p. 55 emphasis in original). The introduction to the supplement circumvents defining the specific condition (a common claims-making strategy), and rather provides a vague, yet all encompassing idea of the condition – diversity. That is, the grounds of diversity are not explicitly constructed.

“Diversity means many things to many people” (p. 75).

While grounds suggest scope and effect with regard to the facts of a condition, the facts themselves are meaningless until they are “framed.” Hence, I want to discuss the frames of diversity in more detail before providing an interpretation of the grounds. But, I feel it is necessary to introduce the concept of grounds as it provides meaningful context for frames. I will return to a more explicit talk of the grounds of diversity in the next chapter. The point I want to stress is that social problems frames give meaning to the parameters that are established (Loseke 2003) and social constructionists have identified common claims-making strategies which construct this meaning.

Diagnostic Frames: What kind of problem is diversity?

The diagnostic frame tells the reader what kind of condition exists (Loseke 2003). “Diagnostic frames answer audience members’ questions about how to understand the meaning of the condition and what causes it” (Loseke 2003, p. 61). Loseke (2003) identifies two broad types of diagnostic frames that are common in defining the scope of a condition: social frames and individual frames. The meaning of diversity in the *NYT* is diagnosed in terms of social forces (Loseke 2003) or more specifically, “mass immigration” of the “foreign-born population.”

In the 1990’s alone, the foreign-born population nearly doubled, to 31 million people. That group now comprises 11 percent of the total reported population - a mass immigration comparable to that of the early 20th century (p. 76).

Additionally, the condition of diversity is constructed as resulting from the well-known and commonly accepted characteristic of the United States, or, the so called “melting pot.” The effectiveness of this claim lies in its familiarity with readers. The major point is that diversity is constructed as part of a larger concern. Spencer (2000) notes how claims-makers construct conditions by appropriating “familiar elements of a broader discursive context” (Spencer 2000, p. 36).

“...The United States is more of a melting pot today than at any time in its history” (p. 76).

Another effective claims-making strategy to encourage audiences to take claims seriously is the use of statistics. Spencer (2000, p. 31) writes, “...official statistics constitute cultural discourse, constructed by all sorts of claims-makers, that is appropriated in constructing new problems.” The use of numbers not only provides

audience members with the scope of a condition, but also provides objectivity (Spencer 2000). The *NYT* diversity supplement contains many such statistics dramatizing the size and economic impact of a diverse population.

Hispanics, African-Americans and Asian Americans now constitute almost 30 percent of the country's population, or 85 million people (p. 76).

Across the country, they [Hispanics, African-Americans and Asian Americans] command over \$1.5 trillion in annual purchasing power (p. 76).

By the year 2050, these same groups will tip the scale from minority to majority (p. 76).

Motivational Frames: Why should anyone care about diversity?

Where diagnostic frames answer readers' questions about what diversity is and how we are to understand it, motivational frames construct the reasons why audience members should care. The motivational claims about diversity are justified by the diagnostic frame and are constructed in ways that key into cultural themes or "widely held ideas about the ways the world should work" (Loseke 2003, p. 69).

Overwhelmingly, the motivation for diversity is constructed as important to support the cultural theme of capitalism, which is defined by beliefs about the "goodness of private property, private profit, and a free market for goods and labor" (Loseke 2003, p. 65).

Audience members should care because diversity is constructed as a business imperative or corporate objective:

If corporate marketers understand the cultural buttons to push, the argument goes, their organizations will prosper (p. 76).

“By bringing about greater diversity in our workplace...attain our ambitious goals in the media marketplace of the 21st century” (The New York Times Company, p. 92).

“Aetna’s managers are graded by their ability to reach diversity-related goals” (Aetna, p. 84).

“Understanding the benefits of diversity is one of our strategic goals for 2003” (LaSalle Bank, p. 91).

This focus on appealing to the cultural theme of capitalism is sensible given that the audience is *NYT* readers – the wealthy, near wealthy and desire to be wealthy (Schudson 1978). This particular audience is comprised of people most likely to applaud business success. Arguably, these readers are among managers and business owners, or aspire to be. Constructing diversity claims in ways resonating with the target audience makes it more likely that claims will be evaluated successfully. Audience members should care because diversity is constructed as a successful marketing strategy:

...the need for companies to reflect the demographic changes within the United States...marketing...to expand their appeal...the available talent pool for the work force... (p. 76).

“There are emerging markets that are presenting themselves every year... to expand their appeal to geographic regions, to people of different races, genders and to other untapped markets...” (p. 76).

“We need to have a work force that is representative of the markets we are trying to serve” (Deutsche Bank, p. 80).

Capturing a bigger share of various ethnic markets is a stated goal of Coors's marketing department (Coors Brewing Company, p. 82).

...to serve their increasingly diverse Midwestern markets (LaSalle Bank, p. 91).

The Prognostic Frame: How is diversity accomplished?

The motivational rhetoric that constructs why readers should care about diversity offers support for the prognostic frame, which constructs the solution or prescription to a condition or problem (Loseke 2003). In the diversity supplement the prognostic frame constructs how diversity is accomplished. This is what constitutes the main line of rhetoric throughout the remainder of the supplement – arguably, diversity training is what is being sold in this particular supplement. The supplement is replete with testimony about the benefits of diversity with many examples of training strategies in the service of business growth and market expansion. The meaning of diversity rhetoric becomes clear: Diversity becomes constructed as good business practice to help meet corporate marketing objectives achieved through training.

Corporate diversity programs were once initiated by human resources departments eager to resolve disputes of disgruntled employees. Today, these programs have evolved into high-profile initiatives, the success of which are tied directly to a company's bottom line as well as to employee compensation and performance reviews (p. 76).

They are in the process of rolling out diversity-awareness programs, which include an online training session and a standard seminar for managers, to help

them work with a diverse work force and customer base (Cingular Wireless, p. 78).

...a training program in diversity awareness...to increase cultural sensitivity so that these managers can work together more effectively (Deutsche Bank, p. 80).

“...training session about managing culture and integration...It is really all about increasing peoples’ awareness about the advantages of diversity” (Pfizer, p. 80).

“I have seen firsthand how diversity training can help to solve real problems and misunderstandings” (testimonial – Coors Bottling Company, p. 82).

The stated goals of diversity including “demographic reflection” and “emerging market” penetration point to the next focus in my analysis, the construction of people or identities. It is through the construction of identities that the grounds for diversity are made clear. As stated earlier, claims-makers construct the grounds when they specify the harm of the condition, who is affected and to what extent. What becomes clear is that diversity refers to certain groups of people who are constructed as needing help. Diversity comes to mean training programs for *particular* people in the service of capitalism. Who are these people?

Chapter Four

Constructing Identity

In the last chapter I discussed how claims-makers *frame* conditions – that is, how they use popular wisdom and cultural themes as resources giving meaning to diversity. Here I will focus on the grounds or parameters themselves. Claims-makers construct the grounds of a condition when they offer definition, when they provide typifications in order to specify who is affected and to what extent. In the diversity supplement I consider both the formal definition as well as the typifying stories that provide implicit definitions of diversity. I argue that diversity is implicitly defined in terms of race and gender, yet as constructed in the *NYT* supplement, appears to have a greatly “expanded domain” (Loseke 2003). This expanded definition of diversity appears first in the introduction to the supplement:

“Diversity means many things to many people – *but one thing is certain. Creating a culture of inclusion that celebrates and leverages diverse perspectives – from race, gender, age, language, country of origin to educational background, sexual orientation and physical disabilities – is a central objective of the country’s most forward-thinking organizations.*” (p. 75, emphasis in the original).

Rationale expansion (Kunkel 1995), which can occur when “...a putative condition [is] constructed by appropriating existing problems as its consequences” (Spencer 2000, p. 31), is constructed repeatedly throughout the rest of the document with respect to ‘diversity’. That is, the construct appropriates traditional categories of diversity such as race and gender and expands the diversity to include many other aspect of individual difference. Diversity is *formally* defined as going beyond race and gender:

“We think of it in a way that is not limited to the traditional EEO (Equal Employment Opportunity) categories of race, gender and ethnicity” (Pfizer, p. 80).

“It is not just race, but culture, gender, religion, age and educational backgrounds” (testimonial – LaSalle Bank, p. 91).

“... not only the traditional aspects of diversity that we’ve mentioned – race, diversity and background – but also language skill sets, experiences, overseas travel, military experience” (Diversity in the Federal Government, p. 96).

But then in examining the specific typifying stories, the content of diversity contracts. Here, I want to emphasize the tension between the formal definition and the typifying examples. As constructed, the typifying examples, or the stories that describe the most common experience (Loseke 2003), do not reflect the formally expanded content. Constructionists have identified this as a successful strategy in that it settles disagreements by avoiding explicit specifications. “Audience members tend to take such typifying stories as specifying the condition at hand” (Loseke 2003, p. 56).

While the rhetoric about diversity seems to be greatly expanded, the typifications of diversity tell a different story. These typifications are revealed in the practical efforts

employed by the sponsors of the supplement, which include councils, forums, network groups and partnerships, as well as the Profiles in Diversity or testimonials offered by each organization. That is, the rhetoric suggesting that diversity is “not just race, but culture,” “not only diversity of race, but diversity of language,” is perhaps the formal construction, yet is not the most common typifying story. Many typifying stories are most obviously about gender:

“Members of the women’s forum...can turn to other women for support and mentoring...get the direct coaching and guidance that they need...help one another learn how to make successful trade-offs in their work-life issues, to find ways to juggle their work and home life” (p. 78).

“We have set out to look at how the system was structured, and see how we could change it to attract women and other talent groups that we need in order to flourish as a company...” (Booz Allen Hamilton p. 90).

The company’s formal executive succession program is an...example of this philosophy in action...Janet L. Robinson... promoted to the newly created position of senior vice president, newspaper operations... Cynthia H. Augustine... took on added responsibilities as president of the Broadcast Group (The NYT Company, p.92).

Many other stories are about race and ethnicity:

“N.S.B.E. is important to us because it is the largest source of African-American engineers in the world...” (p. 78)

Edna Hecht is on the planning committee for the AstraZeneca African American Network, which launched in July... (AstraZeneca, p. 88).

...comprehensive and ongoing recruiting effort... national minority organizations such as the National Black M.B.A. Association, the National Association of Black Journalists, the National Association of Hispanic Journalists and the Asian American Journalists Association (The NYT Company, p. 92).

...along with Solomon B. Watson, our company's general counsel, who is African-American, belong to the eight-member Executive Committee of The New York Times Company (The NYT Company, p. 92).

In February, there was a celebration of Black History Month, with a series of lectures on African-American culture (DaimlerChrysler, p. 94).

Wasow, executive director of BlackPlanet.com – the largest online destination for African-Americans and a subsidiary of Community Connect, Inc. – moderated the discussion (Diversity in the Federal Government, p. 95).

In comparison to the many examples of diversity linked to race, ethnicity and/or gender, there were very few stories typifying other possible forms of diversity.

Silent Coors, a networking group for deaf and hearing-impaired employees... (Coors Brewing Company, p. 82).

“At the round table, we talk mostly about career progression... what it is like to be a...gay staffer.” (testimonial – Booz Allen Hamilton, p. 90).

“For Louise Young, founder of Raytheon's Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual and Transgendered Employee Groups, the Raytheon diversity initiative is more than just tolerating diverse employees” (testimonial – Raytheon, p. 93).

...series of focus groups this year, reaching out to different diverse groups, to see what kinds of things would encourage them to work with the C.I.A., what

preconceived notions they have, and what advertising concepts work well. One of those groups is the disabled (Diversity in the Federal Government, p. 95).

Typifying stories of diversity define not only who is a part of diversity, but also who is not. For example, there is nothing in the supplement which constructs diversity as perspectives, educational background, religious beliefs, age and/or styles of interaction diversity. The stories that typify diversity point to salient characteristics for certain individuals. Moreover, the stories emphasize the differences among individuals that have been historically problematized – namely race, ethnicity and gender. That is, sexuality, physical disability and other forms of difference are less often deemed problems for businesses to overcome.

Claims that construct images of diversity can be seen as motivating readers to offer support or sympathy to those individuals defined as diverse. I argue that these claims key into humanitarian themes which “focus on victims and their suffering” (Loseke 2003, p. 77) as well as the “heroes” that offer liberation. “...humanitarian themes appeal to the noble side of people – our capacity to care about others” (Loseke 2003, p. 77).

The Story of Diversity: Victims and Heroes

Women, minorities and to a lesser extent, disabled... are the particular types of people constructed by the *NYT* as “diverse.” Further, and critically, the act of constructing individuals in terms of their apparent salience creates identities of those who “need” assistance, which stigmatizes particular individuals – “victims” of diversity, so to speak. In discussing the construction of “multicultural students” as victims of a school

system not taking these students' needs into account, Nelson –Rowe (1997, p. 95) writes: “The victim identity assigned to these students makes them ultimately dependent upon the multicultural educator-heroes for their liberation. Moreover, for students to gain their own power they must accept the multiculturalists' construction of their problems.” The claims made in the diversity supplement suggests, too, that certain employees are helped or “liberated” by company leaders or “heroes” and their success is defined in terms of their “diversity.”

The most successful companies... have devoted significant resources to making themselves more diverse... understand how to market themselves in the rapidly expanding multicultural marketplace... those are organizations whose top leadership leads the diversity initiative (p. 78).

“...Minority-individuals face barriers to success in a variety of ways. Mentoring programs help them overcome their limitations and understand how to operate effectively in the company...” (testimonial – Pfizer, p. 80)

...is the secretary of the Coors Hispanic Employee Network (CHEN), though he is not Hispanic. As a floor supervisor, he approached CHEN for help...when he wanted to understand a conflict between two employees... ‘... they ended up giving...a...presentation about the roots of misunderstandings between some Hispanics and non-Hispanics (testimonial – Coors Brewing Company, p. 82).

Born in China...came to the United States...The transition from academia to the corporate world was a difficult one. Wang sought out a senior executive...enlisted his support as mentor, and learned from his experience and

perspective about the company. 'I talked to my mentor...I followed his advice'...(testimonial – DuPont, p. 86).

This effort has the personal backing of...company chairman and Times publisher, ...Each has been a mentor to women and minorities throughout the company, and they take pride in and responsibility for their success (The NYT Company, p. 92).

This rhetoric can be read as defining the dominant group – the heroes – as well as the subordinate group – the victims. Identities constructed in the supplement construct persons in terms of salient characteristics and “cultural markers” (Doane 1997).

However, dominant group members are not distinguished and are, as Doane (1997, p. 377) writes, “...less likely to be reminded of social and cultural differences on a day-to-day basis...” Few references are made to white males in the supplement, the references that do appear reflect the reciprocal nature of ethnicity or “us and them” (Doane 1997) and accompanying power/dominance relations.

Further, the act of definition itself is the province of the powerful. This act of definition can be seen as imposing master statuses (Goffman 1963) on particular people, which have the effect of overriding all other features of their personal identity. That is, the typifying stories of diversity encourage readers to think about diversity in particular ways as exemplified by particular people.

Arguably, the dominant group is neglected because they are among the powerful. There is no need to study a group unless there is a perceived need to change it. The dominant group does not need to be constructed. It is taken for granted baseline, the characteristics that “just are.” What the rhetoric of the diversity supplement repeatedly suggests is that minority individuals or subordinate groups need to learn the ropes, to

assimilate, to “melt” as it were. The rhetoric suggests that the behaviors among women and minorities need to conform to the expectations of the majority/dominate group.

The social relationships depicted throughout this advertisement are such that women and minorities are targets for programs. As O’Barr (1994, p. 4) argues, “Advertising first defines the category, but it quickly moves to place it in a social context.” What follows in the construction of identities in a social relationship is the quality of those relationships. “They are seldom egalitarian...most messages are about dominance and subordination, about power and submission to it” (O’Barr 1994, p. 4).

For the most part, the diversity departments coordinate recruiting efforts and ensure that women and members of minority groups own an increasing share of a company’s primary and secondary suppliers (p. 76).

Coors’s supplier-diversity program sets annual spending goals and objectives related to doing business with minority- and women-owned businesses (Coors Brewing Company p. 82).

...established three affinity groups for African-Americans, Middle Eastern and Arab-Americans and women (DaimlerChrysler, p. 94).

...programs to recruit women and members of minority groups (F.B.I. Recruits Diversity, p. 99)

“The minority candidates we talked to in our survey, both women and men, told us that they are paying attention to whether a company has programs in place that will cater to their needs (proprietary research NYT, p. 100).

Chapter Five

Perpetuating Power/Dominance Relations

I contend that “Diversity Works” is a powerful package of claims. The rhetoric of diversity suggests that its “goodness” is over-determined. It includes everyone, it is good for everyone, and most importantly it *works* for business. Throughout this paper I demonstrated how the formal rhetoric of inclusion is complicated and contradicted by the implicit typifications that provide images and character to diversity. What I attempted to do in my analysis was to unpack the story of diversity and show how it reflects the interests of the dominant over the subordinate.

The major points I make are that diversity the condition is socially constructed as good for business, it helps people (certain people) and is successfully practiced through training programs. Further, I argue that as socially constructed, the condition “diversity” and its solutions are taken for granted in organizational practice as are the attendant collective identities constructed therewith. I assert that the implications of diversity as constructed in the supplement perpetuate power and dominance relations through the construction of identities in terms of those who need help (victims) and those who provide it (heroes).

As stated earlier, the importance of how meaning is constructed goes beyond mere categorization (knowing what to call something, or how to refer to someone) – it instructs us how to act toward conditions and people. I argue that diversity as constructed in “Diversity Works” is a veil. A simple word that comprises and disguises an entire system of meaning – namely issues of racism, sexism, heterosexism, ablism, classism, etc. (Konrad 2003). The potency of the diversity construct is in this very simplicity as it perpetuates division through a story of inclusion. Indeed, as Konrad (2003) notes, the theoretical dilution of the diversity construct makes invisible issues of power and dominance. Konrad (2003 p. 4) argues:

...it is important to draw distinctions between diversity scholarship and the individual differences tradition in organizational studies in order to retain a central focus on power relations among identity groups and avoid diluting the diversity construct to the point that any group composed of non-identical individuals becomes diverse by definition.

I suggest that her argument applies beyond the realm of academia and into organizational practice where through diversity training, power and dominance relations are reproduced. I argue that diversity does not include “dominant group ethnic identity” which Doane (1997, p. 376) defines as: “...the ethnic group in a society that exercises power to create and maintain a pattern of economic, political, and institutional advantage, which in turn results in the unequal (disproportionately beneficial to the dominant group) distribution of resources.” Further, I suggest the power among members of the dominant group to construct identities reinforces their position atop the social hierarchy. “With respect to intergroup relations, a key element of dominance is the disproportionate ability

to shape the sociocultural understandings of society, especially those involving group identity and intergroup interactions” (Doane 1997, p. 376). Dominant group members have the power to define “other” identity as well as the privilege of taking for granted their own. It is in this definition, however, that power imbalances are reproduced through destructive stereotypes and other institutional limitations.

Konrad (2003, p. 6) writes:

...arguments suggesting that managers need to become more flexible to deal with the cultural differences of a diverse workforce often ignore the destructive impact of stereotyping, prejudice, and institutional and interpersonal discrimination because raising these sensitive issues can be threatening to power holders.

Arguments that a diverse set of employees will bring market intelligence about their cultural groups threaten to ghettoize members of historically excluded groups, limiting them to positions where they represent the company to their own communities...arguments that businesses should hire members of historically excluded groups because diversifying the workforce will lead to improved problem solving and creativity imply that a diverse workforce is only welcome if it outperforms the traditional homogeneous group.

Kanter (1993) identifies diversity as one among six important shifts affecting corporate jobs and careers. “The workplace increasingly contains teams of people from many different social and cultural categories. Instead of affirmative action to recruit individuals, the managerial priority has shifted to building teams, to managing and even affirming diversity” (Kanter 1993, p. 290). Kanter also discusses several dilemmas of diversity primarily as a result of “changing numbers.” “An oft-quoted statistic indicates

that by the year 2000 up to 80 percent of all new entrants to the work force will be minorities and/or women” (Kanter 1993, p. 315).

Diversity Supplement agrees:

“By 2050, 85 percent of the entrants into the work force will be people of color and women” (p. 76).

Kanter suggests, however, that the statistic is misleading. “What the raw statistic does not reveal, however, is the likelihood that nonminority white males who are already in place will still dominate the upper ends of professional and managerial pyramids...”(1993, p. 315). She identifies several dynamics that interfere with the acceptance of diversity, which include “the human tendency for managers to pick those with whom they feel most comfortable to serve as confidantes or trusted aides...especially important in higher risk jobs” (1993, p. 316).

The groups who are most often referred to when the term diversity is invoked are women and minorities, or arguably those groups who have been, as Konrad might suggest, “historically excluded.” The rhetoric of diversity which promotes programs for creating a culture of inclusion suggests that the goal is assimilation of behavior among these persons designated as diverse to be consistent with dominant group norms and expectations. Obtusely, there is no group for Anglo-Americans. There is no mention of a Men’s forum. There is no need to assimilate members of the dominant group.

As Konrad (2003, p. 10) argues “Diversity issues only became salient to scholars in the fields of management, human resources, and organizational studies when groups who had been historically excluded from power positions began to enter organizations in large enough numbers to affect organizational processes.” Interestingly, that an

advertising supplement endorsing the benefits of diversity exists at all suggests the underlying dynamics of power and dominance. As Kanter suggests, business success depends in large part on efficiency and predictability, more specifically, control over uncertainty.

I am reminded of Weber's (1946, p. 192) ideas regarding power and stratification. "...the market and its processes 'knows no personal distinctions': 'functional' interests dominate it. It knows nothing of 'honor'." The fact that we have a resource that tells the story of "diversity," that "Diversity Works" itself suggests that something is at stake – namely economic growth and market penetration. We might ask why we need to be persuaded that diversity is a good thing at all. Weber's theories might suggest that the answer lies in the perceived threats among the powerful whose status depends on the acquisition and distribution of goods and services – or more appropriately, economic stability and predictability. "Every technological repercussion and economic transformation threatens stratification by status and pushes the class situation into the foreground...every slowing down of the shifting of economic stratifications leads, in due course, to the growth of status structures and makes for a resuscitation of the important role of social honor" (Weber 1946, p. 194).

Capitalism requires economic predictability for its furtherance, which is in keeping with Weber's ideas regarding formal rationality. Diversity programs can be interpreted as a manifestation of the "rationalization of social life." Weber, cited in Kanter's work (1993, p. 22) writes: "Its specific nature...is developed the more perfectly bureaucracy is 'de-humanized,' the more completely it succeeds in elimination from official business love, hatred, and all purely personal, irrational, and emotional elements

which escape calculation. This is the specific nature of bureaucracy, and it is appraised as its special virtue.”

Weber’s ideas can be used to understand the tensions that are apparent in the formal and implicit rhetoric about diversity that are made apparent in this constructionist analysis. As stated in chapter three, the meaning of diversity is constructed as good for business and marketing and that it respects all forms of difference. But in chapter four I examine typifications, or implicit definitions that contradict these formally stated ideals. I suggest the tensions are due to the incompatibility between the interests of managers to expand business and the ideals of harmony between and among workers.

The status of the dominant group depends on capitalist expansion. Capitalist expansion depends on efficiencies and rationality, which are arguably threatened by the unpredictability among workers who are diverse. Diversity programs can be understood as “technologies” for the “conduct of conduct” (Rose 1996) that exist to maintain the standards as well as the functional hierarchy established by the dominant group – those who manage and those who will be managed.

What becomes clear in reading the diversity myth in its “inextricable whole” (Barthes 1982) is that diversity programs are indeed for particular types of people. That is, they are purported to exist to build awareness and/or tolerance, career development, support, mentoring, guidance for minorities in general (read: non-white, non-male, non-heterosexual, and less frequently, physically disabled). In theory, diversity is constructed to be very inclusive. In practice, diversity is very narrowly applied.

Claims made by diversity advocates throughout the *NYT* supplement, like those made by multicultural educators (Nelson-Rowe 1995) perpetuate collective identity

construction thereby reinforcing the subordinate positions of particular individuals. Throughout the supplement is evidence of both implicit and explicit subjugation. Discourse that reinforces stereotypes, ghettoizes members of historically excluded groups, relegates a diverse workforce as a good thing only if it “outperforms the traditional homogeneous group” (Konrad 2003) perpetuates power/dominance inequalities and reinforces the social order of those who manage and those who will be managed. “The language, norms and values of engineered cultures become internalized and dominate employees’ subjectivity” (Ezzy 2001, p. 631). I argue that as constructed in this one advertisement, diversity claims and the cultural discourse that is appropriated contribute to this rhetoric and as such conceals and reproduces power inequities in organizational practice.

Chapter Six

Reflections and Further Research Considerations

In this paper, I conduct a social constructionist examination of diversity in an advertising supplement published in the *New York Times* Sunday magazine. I interpret the language of diversity claims against a theoretical backdrop informed by the sociology of knowledge in general, social constructionism in particular. I argue that it is through language that we come to know and understand our social world – perhaps most importantly, how we learn to act/react within our social world. Here I leverage theoretical developments that speak to issues of social stratification, power and dominance. As constructed formally, diversity invokes ideals of harmony and togetherness, but as implicitly defined, it perpetuates collective identity construction that reinforces strongly held beliefs about who is victimized and who is heroic. Finally, I attempt to link my interpretive findings to more macro-structural concerns regarding social control in the workplace and the social order, which provides its resources.

My paper begins with a brief discussion of diversity as an objective condition that has roots in the development of modern management. It is beyond the scope of this paper, and not the intent of my arguments, to explicate a more thorough historical investigation. However, further research that attempts to delineate, as Rose might

suggest “the genealogy of subjectification” with respect to the diversity construct would contribute greater understanding of diversity as a “device of ‘meaning production’.”

“These intellectual techniques do not come ready made, they have to be invented, refined and stabilized, they have to be disseminated and implanted in different ways in different practices – schools, families, streets, workplaces, courtrooms” (Rose 1996, p. 130).

As such, I believe that more research is needed that addresses the specifics of diversity programs in organizational practice. Ethnographic studies, participant observation and the like of the approaches of diversity programs are warranted as well as additional content analysis of greater breadth. That is, further research on the diversity construct as defined and depicted in journalistic accounts, advertisements, and organizational brochures as well as in the realm of public policy would lend considerably more to the ideas expressed in this study.

Methodological Reflections

There are of course limitations of my sample as well as methods of analysis. The major limitation with respect to my data is that they are from one particular document organized for and primarily read by a particular audience. Issues of reliability are complicated by the fact that I am one reader who offers one interpretation.

My method of analysis, which is largely interpretive, also has its shortcomings. First, content analysis is said to be at its ‘best’ when performing both qualitative and quantitative analytic strategies (Weber 1985). While I considered the application of both analytic modes, I chose to employ an inductive approach to my work. As such, other

interpretations would likely differ. However, I feel that this limitation offers opportunities for further constructionist analysis of other claims about diversity that appear in major U.S. newspapers as well as other mass media outlets.

Finally, I feel it is important to own the limitations with respect to my macro-sociological interpretations. Specifically, I attempt to link the construct of diversity as it appears in one sensational document to issues of social engineering and social control. I concur that it is a lofty goal, but point to the several advantages of content analysis which have been identified by Weber (1985, p. 10) as concerning: communications which is a “central aspect of social interaction”; that ‘exist over long periods of time’; and provide ‘culture indicators’ that may span ‘even centuries’; and can be used to assess relationships among economic, social, political and cultural change.”

I encourage more constructionist examination of journalistic accounts, opinions and editorials as well as public policy discourse on the topic of diversity. In addition, there is much to be learned from the vantage point of “living diversity” that is ethnographic research within organizations that delves into diversity as it is practiced in everyday life. I believe our understanding will be further informed by more objective pursuits in organizational research as well. I do not hold that qualitative and quantitative methods are “antithetical,” I feel they are mutually supportive and informative. My greatest wish with regard to my work and its limitations is to inspire a dialogue about diversity that does not assume its definition as taken for granted.

Practical Implications

My analysis offers potential contributions to diversity scholarship by attending to issues of power and dominance as they are constructed and interpreted in popular culture. The sociological relevance for this study is three-fold. First, I refer to Schudson's (1984) work regarding advertising as "part of the establishment and reflection of a common symbolic culture." I contend that an interpretation of an advertisement for diversity programs is important in that it reveals a perpetuation of constructions on the basis of race and gender that are, as Barthes might consider, "naturalized" by the existence and distribution of the document itself. Indeed, the characters constructed in the supplement are not "whole" or "unique" people. Readers are told only what is important about them as they represent a type of person who is narrowly constructed (Loseke 2002). They play the part of social type or demographic category (Schudson 1984) thereby reifying these social distinctions as master statuses (Goffman 1963).

Secondly, by dramatizing the ways in which particular people are singled out as needing particular programs, I wish to contribute to a dialogue about power and dominance relations between identity groups. Further, I assert that a social constructionist interpretation on the concept of diversity can aid objective pursuits of the study of intergroup relations and ethnic stratification. As Doane (1997, p. 375) writes, "What is missing is the examination of the characteristics of the dominant group itself, particularly the nature of dominant group ethnic identity."

Finally, my examination of diversity constructions as programs might well contribute to the empirical work on the issues of socialization within the workplace. This is sociologically important in that these programs essentially serve as initiatives for the

“conduct of conduct” (Rose 1996) and arguably invoke the ideal of respecting difference in persons while coordinating sameness in behavior for the benefit of capitalist expansion.

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