

# Intersectionality as a conceptual lens for advancing diversity, equity and inclusion in international business studies: newer developments from critical cross-cultural management studies and their insights for the business case

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## Abstract

**Purpose** – Using intersectionality and introducing newer developments from critical cross-cultural management studies, this paper aims to discuss how diversity is applicable to changing cultural contexts.

**Design/methodology/approach** – The paper is a conceptual paper built upon relevant empirical research findings from critical cross-cultural management studies.

**Findings** – By applying intersectionality as a conceptual lens, this paper underscores the practical and conceptual limitations of the business case for diversity, in particular in a culturally diverse international business (IB) setting. Introducing newer developments from critical cross-cultural management studies, the authors identify the need to investigate and manage diversity across distinct categories, and as intersecting with culture, context and power.

**Research limitations/implications** – This paper builds on previous empirical research in critical cross-cultural management studies using intersectionality as a conceptual lens and draws implications for diversity management in an IB setting from there. The authors add to the critique of the business case by showing its failures of identifying and, consequently, managing diversity, equality/equity and inclusion (DEI) in IB settings.

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**Practical implications** – Organizations (e.g. MNEs) are enabled to clearly see the limitations of the business case and provided with a conceptual lens for addressing DEI issues in a more contextualized and intersectional manner.

**Originality/value** – This paper introduces intersectionality, as discussed and applied in critical cross-cultural management studies, as a conceptual lens for outlining the limitations of the business case for diversity and for promoting DEI in an IB setting in more complicated, realistic and relevant ways.

**Keywords** Intersectionality, Business case, Diversity categories, Context, Culture, Critical cross-cultural management studies, Gender, Race, Ethnicity, Religion

**Paper type** Conceptual paper

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## Introduction

Diversity management is a key concept in many organizational and managerial settings. However, as we propose in this article, diversity and related questions of diversity, equality and inclusion (DEI), are presently conceptualized in limited ways. Through introducing intersectionality (based on [Crenshaw, 1989](#)) as a conceptual lens for managing DEI-related matters in international business (IB), we show that diversity categories intersect with the cultural context from where and wherein they emerge. By doing so, we provide DEI practitioners and scholars in an IB setting with a new “lens” from which to conceptualize and, consequently, manage diversity. This way, we do not only move beyond the business case for diversity ([Lorbiecki, 2001](#); [Ely and Thomas, 2020](#)) but furthermore widen the scope of which “diversity issues” are at stake.

Our article is conceptual, with illustrative examples from the relevant literature. In particular, we draw from empirical studies in critical cross-cultural management studies ([Romani \*et al.\*, 2018](#)) which have shown how diversity categories such as gender, race, ethnicity, religion, ability or sexual orientation, are always and inevitably intertwined with the cultural context from where and wherein they emerge, while at the same time constituting potentially universal DEI issues to be addressed by management and organization ([Mahadevan \*et al.\*, 2020a, 2020b](#)). This then implies that, in (IB) settings wherein organizations and their employees originate from or span multiple locations, intersectionality requires deducing relevant diversity categories and ensuing diversity issues from the cultural context, while at the same time paying attention to general and potentially universal DEI themes.

The major contribution of our article is thus to enable IB scholars and practitioners to see “more” and “more” complex diversity in a situation, and then be able to deduce better, in particular better fitting, diversity management strategies and actions from there. To make this contribution, we proceed as follows. Firstly, we outline the conceptual background of our article, in particular the historical evolution of diversity management concepts, also the “business case for diversity”, and the concept of intersectionality in relation to critical cross-cultural management studies. We then highlight the limits of current approaches to diversity management and show how an intersectional approach to the matter changes the outcome of the diversity analysis and, thus, has the potential to change practice. We conclude with wider implications for diversity management in IB studies.

## Background and rationale

In this article, we propose intersectionality, as discussed and applied in recent critical cross-cultural management studies, as a conceptual lens for diversity management in an IB setting. The background to our argument is the increasingly relevant business case for diversity, and what we identify as its shortcomings. We outline both concepts in this section.

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### *The business case of diversity and its critique*

Diversity management as a concept originates from North America, especially the USA, where it was proposed by scholars in response to social tensions, especially racial inequalities and gender disparities (Litvin, 1997). Social inequality was addressed by organizational diversity initiatives, which originally aimed at reducing differences in opportunities through affirmative action. As a next step, scholars, such as Lorbiecki (2001), proposed a learning perspective on workplace diversity. She advocated using the organizational learning perspective for facilitating DEI, while at the same time cautioning readers against this perspective being applied as a manipulative tool by managers to increase organizational control (Lorbiecki and Jack, 2000). Slowly, but surely, the “valuing diversity” approach was replaced by the “business case” approach, which implies arguing for the advantages of a diverse workforce on the grounds of meeting organizational expectations of gaining (financial or market) success by being inclusive (Herring, 2009). The slow shift in rhetoric from avoiding discrimination to promoting the “business case” eventually resulted in diversity management being promoted as a “must-have” business concept (Lorbiecki, 2001; Ely and Thomas, 2020). Consequently, scholars wanted to fulfil the needs of the business sector by requesting data on when and how diversity had leveraged business advantages. In such ways, academic research attempted to provide evidence of the business case for diversity. The presumed business advantages of diversity were manifold, and included growing productivity and innovation, a better understanding of customer needs, an increased competitiveness, as well as achieving a better social harmony within the organization among others (Lorbiecki and Jack, 2000).

The business case was supported by several studies (c.f. Campbell and Mínguez-Vera, 2008; Terjesen *et al.*, 2015; Oostveen *et al.*, 2014; Karayel and Dogan, 2016). However, other studies had more mixed results (c.f. Dang and Nguyen, 2016; Carter *et al.*, 2010). Some, in fact, even had negative results (c.f. Shehata *et al.*, 2017; Darmadi, 2011).

Thus, while the need for promoting the business case is understandable from an organizational perspective, evidence regarding its applicability was inconclusive (Dang and Nguyen, 2016; Carter *et al.*, 2010; Ely and Thomas, 2020; Georgeac and Rattan, 2022). Claiming a simplistic solution for the business case, such as increasing the number of employees from any diversity categories, did not automatically lead to increased business performance (Ely and Thomas, 2020). Furthermore, professionals from traditionally underrepresented groups, such as LGBTQ+ individuals, women in STEM fields and black American college students, were concerned when their employers claimed the “business case”, and remained attuned to the “moral case” (Georgeac and Rattan, 2022). In this article, we add to the critique of the business case by showing that the business case fails to acknowledge the two main contributions which intersectionality, as discussed and applied by critical cross-cultural management studies, might make to diversity management in an IB context.

### *Intersectionality and newer developments in critical cross-cultural management*

Intersectionality, as coined by Crenshaw (1989), is relevant to diversity management scholars in an IB context due to two reasons. Both will be outlined in this section. Firstly, intersectionality highlights how multiple factors intersect in shaping complex DEI realities and perceptions. Crenshaw’s (1989) original argument was related to Black Feminism, namely, the understanding that black women in the USA face multiple types of discrimination, based on their race *and* their gender, which are comparable neither to a black male, nor a white female perspective. To illustrate the shortcomings of a non-intersectional approach to diversity, Crenshaw (1989) uses the memorable example of an ambulance

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approaching the cross-roads between race and gender and demanding proof as to whether a person was injured on the “gender road” or on the “race road”. Thus, intersectionality can help to consider those diversity categories, and their intersections, that are not normally considered by the business case. For example, when the business case was receiving increased attention in the US–American context (Mensi-Klarbach, 2019), even for-profit organizations rode this wave and started to expect business performance from diversity initiatives. For example, McKinsey reported that inclusion of highly educated women in management boards resulted in better performance (McKinsey and Company, 2007, 2012, 2016). However, what most of these studies – also those who came to inconclusive results (Ely and Thomas, 2020) – had in common was that they focussed the discussion on gender. As a result, several other disadvantaged groups – such as racial or ethnic minorities, LGBTQ+ individuals, and people with disabilities, religious minorities and so on – were not considered anymore as part of the “business case”. The general conceptual contribution behind Crenshaw’s (1989) race- and gender-specific argument is thus that one needs to study and manage “diversity at the cross-roads” to fully understand the problem at hand and to be able to address it in meaningful ways. Secondly, and on a meta-theoretical level, intersectionality underscores the need to investigate diversity matters in context. From a critical cross-cultural management perspective, this then implies that culture, and the cultural context, is another relevant intersection to be considered by diversity management scholars and practitioners, particularly so in an IB setting (Mahadevan *et al.*, 2020a, 2020b).

Originally, critical cross-cultural management, as inspired by critical management studies, is about the need to consider power as inseparable from the social and cultural, world (Romani *et al.*, 2018), and thus to use power-sensitive methods for studying and improving upon management across cultures (Romani *et al.*, 2020). This conceptual lens then changes what cross-cultural management scholars must assume to be the “problem at hand”, namely, cross-cultural differences. Rather than constituting subjective experiences or objective realities of “difference”, any cross-cultural situation then becomes a context in which power-intersections shape who is perceived as “negatively different” and who is thought of as being “the same”. Ultimately, this then makes diversity categories and their consequences, how they are perceived, and by whom and why, and against whose interests, a cross-cultural issue.

The goal of a critical cross-cultural management studies is facilitating system change and working towards the emancipation of previously neglected actors (Romani *et al.*, 2018), and intersectionality is one of the means for doing so (Mahadevan *et al.*, 2020a, 2020b). For example, as Mahadevan (2011, 2015a) suggests, women engineers in the Indian IT industry are double-marginalized by the fact that Western managers expect them to behave like a rational, implicitly “male”, engineer which is the ideal of this global industry, and by their own male Indian project leaders who require them to exhibit the “respectable femininity” expected by middle-class Indian working women at work, to be expressed, for instance, by wearing a Saree at work. These demands by male Indian project leaders make Indian women engineers seem “worse” engineers in the eyes of their Western engineering managers, because the symbolic cultural expressions of “respectable femininity”, such as traditional attire, contradict the Western ideal of rational engineering modernity. Additionally, because “respectable Indianness” in any way is not a cultural demand placed on male Indian engineers, these then are able to symbolically express “good engineering” more easily and are thus advantaged over Indian women engineers, in a global industry that is already male-dominated in the West. All of these expectations and frames are cultural, but the cumulated DEI issue is not cultural: Together, the contradicting cultural norms and multiple culture-specific privileges and disadvantages that intersect for a specific group

(Indian women engineers) in an IB setting result in the marginalization and potential exclusion of this group.

Thus, when diversity scholars stop assuming that diversity categories are universal, the whole picture of “what is the problem” changes, and so do consecutive DEI strategies and actions. Intersectionality is thus a “conceptual lens” by means of which diversity management scholars and practitioners in an IB setting can see more in a situation, for instance, understand that the issues which women engineers in the Indian IT industry face can only be overcome when considering diversity categories as intersecting with the cultural norms, privileges and disadvantages of the contexts involved.

In summary, what diversity management scholars in an IB setting need to learn from intersectionality, as discussed and applied in critical cross-cultural management studies, is that the diversity categories used to understand and, consequently, manage DEI issues, are not universally transferable and applicable. Rather, they are specific to the national, social, political and cultural environment in which they are employed, not to mention a specific time (Carrim and Nkomo, 2016), and it is only at the intersection of culture, diversity and context, at which their cumulated effects are revealed.

### **Examples of intersectionality as a conceptual lens**

The available empirical research proves that different layers of intersectionality can only be uncovered in a particular cultural context. Mahadevan *et al.* (2020a, 2020b) provides prescient details about the lives of two Turkish women in Germany. While their lives could be simplistically framed as being similar in terms of diversity management, they were actually very different. One of them, a qualified dentist, ended up as a manual worker in a factory, due to a variety of circumstances, some of them – but not all – self-chosen. After failing to get her degree accepted in Germany and after having decided to express her Muslim faith by wearing a headscarf, she could not even get a job as a dental assistant. At the same time, religiosity only became relevant to her in Germany, when it became impossible for her to maintain her professional identity because of the obstacles posed to her practicing dentistry by the German labour market regulations. The other woman arrived to Germany as an uneducated young girl, as the bride of a resident migrant Turkish guest worker, and, after difficult years of oppression, marginalization and an inability to communicate in German, she finally became independent – a single mother of four, who dared to speak up for herself. However, hers is also not the story of a Turkish woman oppressed by her husband in an arranged marriage because he, a resident of Germany for many years, had always wanted his wife to be more independent, “like a German woman”. Yet, in the end, it was this seemingly overwhelming challenge that pushed his wife away from him, and it was only then, when her marriage had failed, that she would finally dare to become independent. Thus, whilst both women seem to belong to the same ethnic minority group, each story is radically different, based on the specific intersections of gender, migration background, religion, class and education. Moreover, individuals have the agency to interpret a situation; they co-decide how specific diversity categories affect them, they sometimes make unforeseeable choices, based on prior experiences, personality, boundary conditions and others involved, and they bring all these aspects together in an idiosyncratic logic, beyond academic categories.

Furthermore, the cultural context in which certain diversity dimensions intersect might change how an individual and their presumably unchangeable diversity characteristics are perceived. For example, Kassis-Henderson and Cohen (2020) present a case in which the skin colour of an African-American professional woman became invisible when she started to work in France, and spoke French with an American accent, but became apparent when her

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language skills improved, and she lost her American accent. Suddenly, she was perceived as someone from the former French colonies with low status, compared to the previous situation when she was perceived as a high status American professional, despite her skin colour. In short, white privilege appeared only when the person was considered as part of the French social structure, and race had not been considered as significant, when she was labelled as a foreigner from a high-status Western country. Thus, the same person first experienced racial inequality in her home country, then she was deracialized, and later – ironically, when she had acquired a better grasp of French – her position dropped again, once she was perceived part of French society. From this case, it thus becomes evident that diversity characteristics are malleable in the light of culture and context, but in a predictable way, namely, based on which privilege-disadvantage ratios have been culturally-learned in which context.

The same happens in the case of a medical student born to Cameroonian parents in Germany (Nunka Dikuba and Mahadevan, 2020). When in Germany, she is perceived as a non-white immigrant and feels that in the hierarchy of immigration, she, a “fully black” person, is ranked lower than immigrants of Turkish and Arab descent. Thus, even if the German diversity discourse never mentions “race” explicitly, reality is nonetheless underpinned by it, because the seemingly innocent category of “migration background” prevalent in the country is also clustered along the lines of race (also see Mahadevan and Kilian-Yasin, 2017). Thus, diversity contexts (France/Germany) are not only different from each other but also underpinned by certain, archetypical patterns, such as hierarchies of race, although they have different valences and expressions. Of course, there are other such intersections; for example, the Cameroonian-German medical student was perceived as a rich Western person when studying medicine in Romania, whereas when she is in Cameroon, she becomes nominally white, due to her access to and origins from a more privileged country.

Diversity intersections in light of culture and context are also subject to subversion and other dynamics. For example, class, as a much-neglected diversity dimension (Romani *et al.*, 2021), influences a person’s disadvantage-privilege ratio and also changes their agency, that is: The power to resist. For example, the African-American lawyer in France (Kassis-Henderson and Cohen, 2020) simply reverts back to an American accent to induce more positive perceptions, and she can do so because she has access to this privileged identity, based on her high education (class). The Cameroonian-German (Nunka Dikuba and Mahadevan, 2020) experiences more racism and racialization in non-academic settings than at university, and it can be expected that, as soon as she has obtained her medical degree, racialization will impact her less negatively because she has a proven competency certificate to show.

Such cases underscore that there are no universally-prescriptive patterns of how one diversity dimension comes to the forefront for the individual. For example, in the case of the Cameroonian-medical student, initially, gender was not part of the experience because race and the need to gain social capital through education were so much more relevant to her lived experience. However, as soon as she gained a medical degree, she came to realize that she faces disadvantage as a woman; likewise, in the case of the US–American lawyer, it is indiscernible whether gender intersects with the contextualized effects of race and migration. This does not mean that Crenshaw’s (1989) original argument is invalid. Rather, it proves how one needs to deduce the relevant intersections from a specific context, keeping in mind the subjective processes of how individuals cope with and make sense out of a situation. Carrim and Nkomo (2016), for example, provide a detailed description of how South African women managers of Indian descent are perceived in their managerial roles

and how they work through situations, which are shaped by socio-historical and political contexts. Although their situation is unique, it is also typical if considered more abstractly: Again, this case highlights how intersectionality is context-dependent. A diversity management practice that tries to pre-define and pre-scribe the problem would certainly fail to address the issue at hand, and this is where considering both the objective and subjective properties of intersectionality serve as a practical concept to make sure that the diversity action taken is relevant in the sense that it is based on the *real* problem in need of resolution.

Intersectionality, as discussed and applied by critical cross-cultural management studies, also requires the acknowledgment that it is often simply the “sign of difference” which tips the scales. Knorr (2020) provides such an example on the dynamic of intersectionality, when she analyses the situation of two Turkish employees in a Danish company. One of them is perceived as a model immigrant in his company and, to ethnic majority employees, serves as a perfect example of the integrated, second-generation Turkish immigrant: He has completed a prestigious business degree, he works in a competitive environment, and he was selected based on the rational criterion of expertise. However, when he started to organize his wedding and speaking to his fiancée in Turkish over the phone, he lost trust in the eyes of his colleagues and superiors and was eventually marginalized: This small sign of “difference” and “alienness” made his superiors doubt his abilities and belonging. Ultimately, and despite the fact that he continued to perform admirably, the idea of him not being “Danish enough” emerged, and his managers started to question his “cultural fit” with a “Danish” firm.

Similarly, Mahadevan (2017) reflects how she, an Indo-German woman with a multilingual and international profile, shakes hands less extensively than ethnic majority male German co-workers of an older generation and how this leads to a “difference spiral” within the organization, cumulating in questions concerning her “culture” and “religion”, which are construed as different from “German culture”. However, in her mind, the difference in behaviour originates from her being a cosmopolitan person, who had previously worked in the global IT-industry, and now finds herself in a traditional environment of a regional, small/medium-sized company in Germany, full of local people.

Thus, as both examples show, experiences of difference are also a projection screen. In both cases, small incidents of behavioural difference might have gone unnoticed – but they were, in fact, so overloaded with meaning that they became significant. Intersectionality also necessitates understanding that difference lies in the eyes of the beholder and is linked to own identity processes and, potentially, also identity fears. Special attention should be paid to those small incidents of behavioural difference, which are exaggerated, and it should then be investigated why and how this has happened (and whose interests underlie the process).

In the case of Mahadevan (2017), for example, in a cultural context in which the relative “Germanness” of migrants was a heated topic in public discourse, this organization should perhaps undertake a change in organisational culture towards internationalization, and Englishization, although this itself is not unproblematic in a post-colonial context, as internationalization poses a challenge to organizational identity and perceptions of competence. This is especially the case for older ethnic majority employees who face more culturally diverse members of a younger generation who seem to be able to meet internationalization challenges more easily. This might then result in the older generation projecting the negative label of “migrant” or “cultural stranger” onto the younger generation, to manage their own fears about whether they will now be laid off and replaced by this new profile (Mahadevan, 2017). By enabling organizations to reflect upon such transfer effects, intersectionality thus helps avoid unwanted and unjustified framing effects (Ridgeway, 2009).

## Discussion

Out of the previous considerations emerge three major insights for diversity management in an IB context. These are outlined in this section. Again, the contribution is not that intersectionality as a conceptual lens changes the picture completely: It just puts emphasis on previously neglected facets and enables diversity management scholars and practitioners to reconceptualize the issues at hand, so that they can make sure that the diversity action taken is relevant in the sense that it is based on the *real* problem in need of resolution.

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### *Intersectionality contextualizes diversity categories in time and place*

Firstly, intersectionality as a conceptual lens places diversity management in its historical and cultural context. For example, it helps diversity management scholars see how key diversity categories, race and gender, are contingent upon both. Historically, diversity management became an unavoidable concept in the early 90s, deriving from practitioners to management textbooks (Litvin, 1997; Nkomo and Cox, 1996). In theory, both should have come to the forefront of the discussion. However, at that time and in that place (North America), race seemed to be the major issue to be discussed (Cox and Nkomo, 1990). At the same time, the idea of diversity management travelled from the USA to Europe, but the focus changed, as gender issues became central (Risberg *et al.*, 2019), and racial inequalities were considered secondary, especially as addressing race was problematic, even taboo, in post-Second World War Europe (Lentin, 2008). Thus, in this context, the discussion about race was silenced (e.g. Mahadevan *et al.*, 2020a, 2020b; Nunka Dikuba and Mahadevan, 2020).

Ultimately, both gender *and* race (or ethnicity) became and presently are crucial diversity categories, but they matter differently in various contexts. This then implies that the diversity of diversity categories is already present in IB in multiple, culture-specific ways: For example, race operates differently across cultures, and intersectionality helps scholars and practitioners in an IB setting to become aware that this is the case. Conversely, without considering the social, political and historical context, diversity categories as part of the business case become mere empty signifiers: They are a conveniently used label, but they are not filled with meaningful content anymore. Or, in simple words: They have then become measurable, but what was intended to be measured has been lost. Intersectionality as a conceptual lens helps diversity management scholars see how universal and culture-specific dynamics intersect and thus fill diversity categories with meaning anew.

### *The business case overshadows intersectionality in practice*

Originally, diversity management aimed at including historically disadvantaged people by providing them equal access to employment and leadership roles (Risberg *et al.*, 2019), and social justice and anti-discrimination were the major initiators of diversity measures (Risberg and Pilhofer, 2018). To achieve this, diversity categories were frozen around six major social issues: gender/gender identity, race/ethnicity, sexual-orientation, disability, religion and age and these became predetermined categories in research (Risberg and Pilhofer, 2018; Triana *et al.*, 2021) and practice. Consequently, essentialization and homogenization within each of these categories was unavoidable (Tatli and Özbilgin, 2012).

At this point, it is relevant to consider why intersectionality, as a concept originally developed in the context of the diversity management literature in North America (Litvin, 1997), has not taken further roots in practice. Here, it remains the mere warning that not merely one dimension of diversity might be in place, but rather a complex set of dynamic interconnections of privileges and disadvantages shape individuals' lives. At the same time, the business case for diversity has increased in practical relevance (see before), and this

might explain why intersectionality could not take further roots: Even when decision-makers are aware of the phenomenon of intersectionality, choosing to devise their strategies and actions on the conceptual lens of intersectionality will be detrimental, as they cannot make a clear claim for the business case anymore if they do: With intersectionality, it becomes fuzzier and less quantifiable who is privileged and disadvantaged, and how exactly, and the business case argument might ultimately disappear. Thus, to uphold the business case, intersectionality as a conceptual lens is ignored or overshadowed in practice, for the sake of clustering employees into clear diversity categories, therewith “proving” the business case.

### *Diversity categories are, in fact, intersectional*

The second contribution which intersectionality as a conceptual lens makes to diversity management in an IB context is related to the insight that diversity categories, in reality, are always blurred. All that is required for implementing intersectionality as a conceptual lens is thus that diversity management scholars and practitioners dare pursue this idea and that they reconfigure their theory and practice from there. Köllen (2021) provides a detailed account of the blurred demarcation lines between diversity categories, even within each category. For example, gender, which is widely considered to be socially constructed, is often used incorrectly to mean “men and women”, indicating a dichotomy between biological sexes. Yet, this concept has been supplemented by “intersex” [1] individuals, many of whom are falsely categorized within a sexual orientation. While, theoretically and practically, gender and sex could break up the dichotomy of men and women, this is rarely the case (Bendl *et al.*, 2009).

The issue of race and ethnicity is even more complex. Whereas American literature and practice uses the concept of race, in continental Europe, the notion of race is both culturally (Lentin, 2008) and legally (EC, 2000) rejected. “Race” is thus an explicit diversity category in North America, and a “silenced” one in Europe (Lentin, 2008), a context in which the term “ethnicity” or “culture” is used more often (Mahadevan *et al.*, 2020a, 2020b). Thus, the same phenomenon might be classified as “inter-racial” in North America and as “inter-cultural” or “inter-ethnic” in Europe. Consequently, DEI theories and measures cannot be simply transplanted from North America to Europe, or vice versa, without the necessary contextualization. Likewise, the notion of “Hispanic” (Latino/Latina/Latinx) individuals being a distinct racial minority applies to the American, but not the European context (Köllen, 2021) and it illustrates the complexity of such issues, as they are considered to be a racial minority in America, but not in Europe; while, Asian heritage is considered as ethnicity in the USA (Köllen, 2021), so race and ethnicity have distinct meanings in US context and ethnicity is used for both in Europe. As DEI categories, race and ethnicity are thus highly contextual. Brazil, for example, applies strict phenotypical distinctions, which could be deeply problematic in other contexts, while the “one drop rule” employed in some US states is even harsher in terms of setting individuals apart from the privileged, white population.

Furthermore, there are also transnational ethnic groups characterized by high internal diversity, which are nonetheless subjected to discrimination across the intersections of culture, ethnicity and race, such as the Roma people. This group forms the largest ethnic minority in several Central-Eastern European countries (e.g. in Czechia, Slovakia, Hungary, Romania and Bulgaria), and their inclusion and exclusion in the majority society is neither purely based on (cultural) heritage, nor on phenotypes. Still, the discrimination against Roma people remains pronounced (European Commission, 2021). Consequently, they are eligible as a target of diversity management initiatives, but they are rarely acknowledged in

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diversity management practice in the region (Primecz, forthcoming): another silenced but relevant DEI intersection.

### Implications

Fixed categories are not only problematic in several cases: They are furthermore often difficult to define in practice. While fixed categories are needed for claiming the business case (Risberg and Pilhofer, 2018), they also lead to the erroneous assumptions about the essential and homogenous characteristics of those that fall within each diversity category. However, as the previously outlined intersectional approach proves, DEI issues are strongly embedded in their socio-cultural contexts. Thus, to reach its original goals, diversity management would benefit from focusing on social justice (the moral case) rather than on the business case. As IB inevitably spans different cultures and contexts, reducing complex DEI issues to the business case in an IB context can lead to a great variety of social problems and inequalities, depending on culture in context. By complicating the picture in ways that does reality justice, intersectionality provides a more nuanced understanding of dynamic inequality structures in the making, and traces how the categories of privileged and underprivileged intersect with each other – sometimes constructively, sometimes destructively.

Much like an intersectional approach to culture has changed the focus points and, consequently, the goals of a critical cross-cultural management, intersectionality as a “conceptual lens” might do the same for diversity management in an IB setting. Or, in other words: a diversity management that focuses on measuring the business case and remains negligent to intersectionality, might be accused of the same “perpetuation of cultural ignorance” that Venaik and Brewer (2016, p. 563) ascribe to a cross-cultural management focussing on measuring cross-cultural differences by means of dimensions of national culture.

The main insight here is that it is not that intersectionality changes the DEI picture completely, but rather that it puts the existing pieces of the puzzle together in novel and more shifting ways, thus enabling diversity management researchers and practitioners to reconceptualize the issue. Or, in other words: Intersectionality complicates the DEI picture in ways that do IB realities justice.

Intersectionality thus underscores again that the business case failed to fulfil its promise, due to unfounded expectations, and the inherent characteristics of diversity itself. For example, Ely and Thomas (2020, p. 117) arrived at the conclusion that “a simplistic and empirically unsubstantiated version of the business case” does not contribute to organizations. Georgeac and Rattan (2022) go so far as to argue to stop making the business case because it delivers counter-productive results. Intersectionality as a conceptual lens provides further evidence on how the business case is, indeed, limited in conceptualizing diversity in meaningful ways.

From an intersectional perspective, a “measurable” diversity management that is framed by the business case has failed to acknowledge that essentializing diversity categories (e.g. men vs women, cis-gender vs transgender people, people with vs without disability etc.), means that the business case approach assumes that representatives of minority and majority of a given diversity dimension are essentially different in work-related skills and characteristics. Simply put, a business case approach makes no sense without the difference thesis. But does the difference thesis advance DEI? As Ely and Thomas (2020, p. 117) argue it would be a better approach when “leaders create a psychologically safe workplace, combat systems of discrimination and subordination, embrace the styles of employees from different identity groups”. This is the condition when individuals can “turn cultural

differences into assets for achieving team goals” (p. 118), and Ely and Thomas claim that this is only possible when equality, not difference, is in the focus.

If one accepts that discrimination of certain individuals occurs due to their belonging to certain social groups (e.g. sexual minorities, minority religions, having certain disabilities, etc.), the claim for the business case is groundless, as a person’s diversity status does not explain their work-related skills and characteristics. This means that people with disabilities, LGBTQ+ professionals, young or elderly employees, women and intersex people or members of minority ethnic or religious groups are not better or worse employees, due to their diversity status. Consequently, it is illogical to assume that there are systematic differences between representatives of minority and majority social groups in terms of skills and characteristics. It is, therefore, erroneous to assume that including people from minority social groups will bring new sets of skills, or knowledge to organizations.

At the same time, in diversity management practice, it is assumed that individuals differ from a white, middle-aged, able-bodied, heterosexual, man with majority religion in exactly *one* characteristic, e.g. by being completely similar, except the individual is a woman or has a disability or is a member of a religious minority. However, in reality, as for example [Köllen \(2020\)](#) shows, most people belong to privileged groups in certain diversity categories, *and* to unprivileged groups in certain other diversity categories. The complex intersections entailed in belonging to certain diversity categories influence social and organizational life, including aspects of this which might have an effect on employees’ work-related skills and characteristics, while others are not.

In reality, all diversity categories have a certain temporality and fluidity: For example, as people get older over time, they pass “being young”, then, later, they “become old”. Likewise, a professional might start their career being an able-bodied professional, and then encounters health issues. Indeed, even a random accident might change this status, and disability status also differs across countries: For example, a person who is legally blind in one country might not be in another one. Thus, the idea of clear-cut diversity categories is an illusion at best: There are more than merely two dichotomist genders and sexes; the demarcation lines between old, young and middle-aged cannot be fixed; a disability status is not a fix-point in time and place; gender-identity and sexual orientation might change over time; the perceptions of race and ethnicity depend on context and the situation and finally, an employee’s religion and its relation to the dominant belief system is perceived differently in various contexts. At best, this blurs diversity categorizations; at worse, it renders them completely incoherent. Thus, it is not that intersectionality unnecessarily complicates the picture: It simply does reality justice, particularly so in an IB context.

Ultimately, intersectionality as a conceptual lens contradicts the measurements placed upon people in business. While it is true that also existing classifications of employees based on their privileged and disadvantaged statuses demand for a certain tolerance for contraction ([Doldor and Atewologun, 2021](#)), the result of intersecting identities is even more difficult to predict. In some cases, the disadvantages simply add up or even multiply each other, for example being a person with disability and having an ethnic minority status rarely provides any privilege in any society. While in other cases certain disadvantages are in dynamic interrelation, for example being a migrant Muslim woman in a Western society is not a privileged position, but acceptance and support for women, even when they are Muslims, and have a migration background might be reachable compared to men with migration background and Muslim faith. Furthermore, in some cases, the combined effect of certain diversity categories does, indeed, make individuals a corporate “asset”. For example, as [Utzeri et al. \(2020\)](#) find in their study of the automotive industry in France and Germany, women who are also foreign nationals can help the organizations overcome the limitations of

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existing gender-stereotypes, as they have not internalized the dominant culture-specific gender-roles, such as the German idea of “engineering” being a “male field”. Thus, the outcome of an intersectional approach might not contradict the business case in the end, yet, for being sure of whether there are grounds for the business case, the starting point *must* be intersectional.

Intersectionality does not categorically disagree with the idea that diversity categories *might be* universal in some cases. However, it always presumes that the ways in which diversity categories manifest unique and context-dependent, and that one needs to at least check for how this is the case first, and to also consider power-effects when doing so. Thus, certain diversity categories might be universal, but their exact application, and, especially, their intersectionality, is context-dependent. For instance, in a multinational company (MNC) designing its diversity management strategy, “gender” might be given different meaning as it travels across countries (Moore, 2015), resulting in a divergent approach to the same strategy and how it should be applied by local management. Much the same would be true regarding guidelines for religiosity: One cannot expect workplaces to be secular all over the world, because in some cultural contexts religion is part of how work and life intersect. (Mahadevan, 2012). At the same time, it is also important to reflect upon seemingly innocent religious practices, for example, the corporate Christmas party (Hidegh and Primecz, 2020).

As Köllen (2022) suggests, what Aristotle has termed *phronēsis* – practical wisdom – is the only way to comprehend the depth and complexity of such cases, and how they unfold. While it is impossible to teach this, the skill of deducing categories from practice can be learned through experience. This then also means that predetermined categories are ineffective, and that organizations’ need for concrete and measurable indicators – which is central to the business case – cannot be fulfilled by the insights that are potentially brought about by intersectional analyses. Rather, and as Bouten-Pinto (2016) proposes, and in line with what critical cross-cultural management suggests, the task would be to aim for a more reflexive and power-sensitive diversity management theory and practice, and to educate the reflexive practitioner who can contribute to systemic change and emancipation.

The major issue standing in the way of intersectionality as a conceptual lens taking roots in practice is the prevailing fixation on the business case. Of course, there are reasons as to why organizations pursue the business case. For instance, in practice, organizations are legally obliged to engage with certain diversity categorizations, to prove their success in managing diversity, based on the legal framework set in a specific country or context. Nonetheless, theoretically and practically, intersectionality is the only conceptual lens that does the complexity of the phenomenon justice and enables the “reflexive diversity management practice” envisaged by Bouten-Pinto (2016).

Wider implications emerge with regard to how academia and practice conceptualize invogue concepts, such as diversity or corporate sustainability. For instance, as Banerjee (2008, p. 51) convincingly argues: “discourses of corporate citizenship, social responsibility and sustainability are defined by narrow business interests”. He concludes that this leads to an infringement of the interests of certain, other external stakeholders, before criticising the notion of “stakeholders” itself. Indeed, the rhetoric of diversity in business tends to be highly emancipatory, but due to the narrow focus of how diversity is conceptualized as part of the business case, it fails to bring about its desired, emancipatory goals.

Thus, with Newburry *et al.* (2022) we call for research and practices that place broader diversity, equality/equity and inclusion issues centre-stage, such as migration and refugee movements and their diversity effects, in an international business environment. We presume that intersectionality as concept is highly applicable to such phenomena, as it widens the focus on what diversity involves, while sharpening the empirical and practical

focus for tackling diversity phenomena. [Ridgeway \(2009\)](#), in her work on framing effects, argues that some diversity characteristics often pre-structure an interaction or situation, regardless of the specific interaction or situation to which they are applied. For instance, organizations might be inherently 'male' on a structural and institutional level ([Ridgeway, 2009](#)), which then overshadows any further attempt at higher equality and inclusion. Transferring this insight to the international business sphere, [Mahadevan \*et al.\* \(2017\)](#) have shown that also religious and ethnic frames such as 'the Arab world' can overshadow actual experiences and interaction, in this case: How German and Tunisian engineers work together in a research and development project. Because male German engineers expect female Tunisian engineers to be traditional, and submissive, they doubt their engineering abilities – even though their performance suggests otherwise – and only perceive those external stimuli, which confirm the dominant frame, this way constructing both Tunisia and the Tunisian research organization and its members as 'traditionally Arab'. To overcome such biases, it would be necessary to also include culture, as a multidimensional and complex construct ([Mahadevan, 2020a, 2020b, 2023](#)), and as a diversity phenomenon to be considered in an intersectional manner, and to train international managers for a higher cultural sensitivity and reflexivity, particularly in relation to their own biases. For doing so, [Richter \*et al.\* \(2016\)](#) have suggested the development of cultural archetypes, while [Kakar and Mahadevan \(2020\)](#) have reflected upon the power-implications of the archetypical roles that headquarters and subsidiaries in multinational enterprises play. Ultimately, this then requires more power-sensitive, reflexive and intersectional research and practice at the nexus of diversity and culture in IB settings.

Finally, because diversity categories are deeply embedded in context, it is essential to rely on social sciences and anthropological research results in each context, when DEI policies and practices are developed. Diversity and inclusion experts can consult with social scientists who are familiar with social inequalities in the given context. In-depth ethnographic, sociological and qualitative research is capable of providing the necessary information about societies and cultures to organizational decision-makers. Adhering to the general guidelines of DEI, that is: Becoming more inclusive to members of underprivileged social groups in each context, sociologists and anthropologists could provide the necessary data on whom to invite, include and positively discriminate, to facilitate more diversity, equality/equity and inclusion in organizations. This then implies that IB research and practice is required to become more attentive to and more grounded in context-rich sociological and anthropological research.

### **Summary and conclusion**

Organizations would prefer to have a simple and well-structured way of how to manage diversity and inclusion, and it would be appreciated if it were easy to measure what has been achieved. However, the business case for diversity does not do complex IB realities justice: At best, it is insufficient, at worst, it creates more inequalities and exclusion. Conversely, an intersectional approach, as discussed and applied in critical cross-cultural management studies, complicates the picture in a way that does reality justice: When approaching DEI issues from this perspective, scholars and practitioners can make sure that their strategies and actions are relevant in the sense that they are based on the *real* problem in need of resolution. The only way to use intersectionality as a conceptual lens is to deduce the relevant diversity categories from the setting, and to apply practical wisdom when doing so. We thus suggest that diversity management scholars and practitioners in an IB setting consider these newer developments in critical cross-cultural management and work towards a more intersectional DEI theory and practice, in exchange with sociologists and

anthropologists who can provide them with the empirical data and methodological advice for doing so.

As Köllen (2021) explains intersexuality and transgenderism are still highly marginalized as the alleged clear distinction between men and women (or femininity and masculinity) is assumed, while “trans persons perceive a mismatch between their biological sex and their gender identity, and different ways and degrees exist of adjusting their gender presentation to their gender identity. Intersex persons possess sex characteristics that do not correspond with the ones of the dichotomous approach of clearly distinguishing between being male or female. Therefore, both phenomena belong to the diversity dimension of “gender/sex.” However, in practice, if, indeed, they are mentioned at all, they are usually shunted into a dimension where they are grouped together with sexual orientation.” (Köllen, 2021, p. 263). It is very common, indeed, in practice that using initials for LGBT + individuals, intersexuality and transgenderism are grouped under the same umbrella as lesbian, gay and bisexual individuals, although neither intersexuality nor transgenderism are sexual orientation.

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