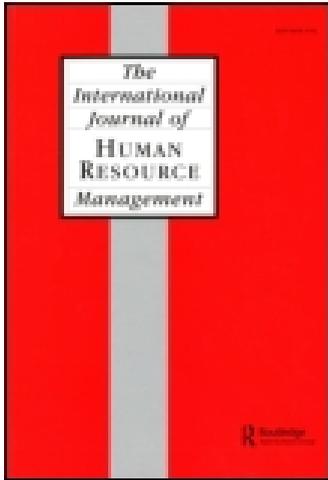


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Fiona Moore^a

^a School of Management, Royal Holloway, University of London, Egham, Surrey, UK

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An unsuitable job for a woman: a ‘native category’ approach to gender, diversity and cross-cultural management

Fiona Moore*

School of Management, Royal Holloway, University of London, Egham, Surrey, UK

This paper takes an ethnographic study of the recruitment of women at BMW MINI between 2003 and 2006 as the basis to explore the impact of the concepts of ‘native categories’ and ‘recontextualisation’ on diversity management and cross-cultural management. I consider how managers’ and workers’ subconsciously held cultural categories relating to gender and work affected efforts to increase the number of female line workers in the plant, and how these were further complicated by the recontextualisation of German native categories in a British context. In doing so, this paper will develop a better understanding of the way native categories affect management and international business, provide an addition to the literature on recontextualisation, by introducing the concept of ‘native categories’ to research exploring the effects of recontextualisation on cross-cultural knowledge transfer, international human resource management strategy and marketing, and, finally, develop some understanding of how diversity management initiatives can fail in practice.

Keywords: cross-cultural management; gender; Germany; recontextualisation; subsidiary management; UK

This paper takes an ethnographic study of the recruitment of women at BMW MINI as a basis from which to explore the impact of ‘native categories’ on diversity management and cross-cultural management, and on how these were rendered more complex by the process of ‘recontextualisation’. This is a phenomenon whereby exporting a concept or practice across borders leads to either the practice or its meaning changing as it is incorporated into the local culture. I consider how managers’ and workers’ subconsciously held cultural categories relating to gender and work affected efforts to increase the number of female line workers in the plant, in line with a diversity management initiative instituted by the plant’s parent company, and how these were further complicated by the recontextualisation of German native categories in a British context.

The objectives of this paper are: first, to explore the native category of ‘gender’ as it was defined by the workers and managers at the BMW MINI plant between 2003 and 2006, considering that what each group means by the same concept may be subtly, but crucially, different; second, to consider how the categorisation of gender, and the gendering of work, in Britain and Germany affected the plant’s diversity-management efforts involving the recruitment and retention of female workers; third, to investigate the recontextualisation of German and British categories of gender and work, through the process of incorporating of the Cowley Works plant into the BMW group; and finally, to explore the theoretical and practical implications of the above for cross-cultural management, particularly regarding the question of why diversity management initiatives can fail despite the good intentions of the participants in these initiatives.

*Email: fiona.moore@rhul.ac.uk

The contributions of the paper are: to develop a better understanding of the way native categories affect IHRM, principally as regards diversity management; to add to the literature on cross-cultural management by considering native categories as subject to, and acting on, recontextualisation; and to develop some understanding of how cross-cultural diversity management initiatives (particularly those relating to gender) can fail in practice due to un- or subconsciously held attitudes on the part of managers and workers. The results should allow more insights into the action of native categories, recontextualisation and, by extension, other intangible processes, in MNCs for IHRM researchers, and should assist HRM practitioners in assessing cases of policy failure and improving diversity management initiatives.

Theoretical background: native categories, recontextualisation and diversity management

Native categories

The starting point of this paper is the arguments of Buckley and Chapman (1997), later developed by Harris (2000) and more recently by Moore's (2012) research on German managers in the UK that the management of cross-cultural organisations is shaped by 'native categories'. Native categories are defined by Buckley and Chapman (1997) as 'self-generated and valid in any local context' (p. 283), affecting how people in a given group, such as managers, classify their social environment. They generally constitute tacit knowledge, as they are un- or subconsciously held, and their possessors may not be directly aware of their constitution.

The study of native categories in anthropology and sociology goes back to the work of Durkheim and Mauss (1967 [1903]), Hertz (1973 [1909]) and others of the *Annee Sociologique* school in the early twentieth century, later to form the basis of structuralist anthropology (Needham 1973). Needham (1967), summarising the work done on the identification and interpretation of native categories, indicates that 'the fundamental concern of social anthropology [is] classification' (p. viii), and that an anthropologist, arriving in a new society, 'learns to see the world as it is constituted for the people themselves, to assimilate their distinctive categories ... His [sic] analytical task, consequently, is to apprehend a mode of classification' (pp. viii–ix). In particular, native categories are often used as a means by which people define their own identities as members of particular groups, and the character traits of others in different groups, as outlined in Levi-Strauss' (1963) seminal article 'The Bear and the Barber'. The ways in which different groups define themselves and others through a process of developing, and negotiating, native categories is a fundamental subject of anthropology and sociology.

While the subject has less often been discussed in management studies, a key work is Buckley and Chapman (1997), which argues that reality, for managers as for any human group, is socially defined (p. 288), and that anthropologists' use of the 'native category' could equally apply as a means of understanding managers. They argue that 'Western management science has never been objective; it has, rather, consisted of an ad hoc mixture of categories generated by the observer and the observed', and thus that greater attention should be paid to the native categories of managers rather than attempting to explain managerial behaviour in supposedly 'objective' terms (p. 284). Native categories, in the context of management studies, can be therefore defined as social categories (such as 'HR managers' or 'Germans') which are continuously formulated and re-formulated by managers and workers through both conscious and unconscious processes of collective definition, with reference both to external and internal discourses and concepts, which are

largely tacit, and which are used as a means of organising and understanding their social world.

Harris' (2000) article on native categories is an epistemological piece about research on business as a culture-building activity, which develops Buckley and Chapman's conclusions by looking at the role of management literature on the formation of native categories. He points out that most management phenomena, including the concept of management itself, are highly subjective (p. 759). He then argues that management research is interpreted by managers according to their own categories, and used as a means of classifying the world (p. 757), and to develop rituals and means of dealing with events (p. 760). While Harris does not cite cross-cultural management examples specifically, an examination of managerial literature defining 'national cultures' (e.g. Hickson and Pugh 1997) reveals structural similarities with Levi-Strauss' (1963) native Americans classifying groups within the tribe as 'Bear People' or 'Fish People', in that both involve the imposition and adoption of a particular identity associated with particular social and physical traits, which is also subject to negotiation, discussion and the acknowledgement of exceptions.

Recontextualisation

The concept of native categories can be further developed by adding to it the indirectly related concept of recontextualisation. Recontextualisation was defined by Brannen (2004, p. 595) as 'how transferred organisational assets ... take on new meanings in distinct cultural contexts'. Essentially, recontextualisation is the phenomenon whereby taking a concept or practice across borders leads to either the practice or its meaning changing, how semiotic meanings shift from culture to culture (p. 604). Brannen's (2004) study of Disney theme parks in Tokyo and in Paris develops the concept of recontextualisation to consider the question of why the Japanese theme park was more successful than the French one, despite the fact that Hofstede's analysis of dimensions of culture puts France as culturally 'closer' to America than is Japan, and despite the fact that the French are the biggest consumers worldwide of Disney products (Brannen 2004, p. 594). She argues that in a new context, the sign becomes a signifier in a different context, not divorced from its original meaning, but different to it (p. 606). However, managers assume that if the sign is transferable, then so are its meanings, confusing the sign with the signifier, and leading to failures to transfer. She also notes that values and meanings are particularly subject to change through recontextualisation.

Brannen's analysis has been supported by other articles on cross-cultural transfer of practice, even if they may not necessarily use the same language. Sako's article (1994) on the transfer of lean production to the UK and Germany clearly indicates how the concept and associated practices are recontextualised in the British and German contexts, and Graham (1995) makes similar points about lean production in the USA. Gertsen and Zolner (2012), looking at the recontextualisation of corporate values of a Danish-origin MNC, note that the company's values seem to be wholeheartedly adopted by the subsidiaries, but what the subsidiary employees interpret these values to mean is not necessarily the same as in the headquarters context. Osland and Osland (2005) consider how generic, American concepts of SIHRM get recontextualised in the light of local concepts and practices in Central America. Significantly, this includes concepts of gender and work: although there may be similar equality legislation in place in many central American countries, its use in practice varies significantly (p. 2226). Peterson (2010) considers how, in the Egyptian context, global products become recontextualised in the

light of local development initiatives, class structures and so forth. Finally, Tomlinson's (2001) book *Cultural Imperialism* is a look at how 'global' brands, practices and so forth become recontextualised in different local contexts.

As such, it follows logically that native categories can also be the subject of recontextualisation, as the native categories associated with a particular term, such as 'gender', 'ethnic diversity' or indeed 'management', are interpreted in different ways in different cultural contexts, and thus situations may emerge in which managers from different cultures may find themselves talking at cross purposes without realising it, or, alternatively, redeveloping their own native categories through influence from other cultures. There is also some evidence that categories related to diversity are subject to recontextualisation: Moore (2012), for instance, indicates that a survey applied by German managers to a British subsidiary contained ethnic categories from the German context which do not necessarily read in a British context (for instance 'Oriental'), but failed to include categories such as 'Irish' which are specific to the British context. There are, consequently, both theoretical and practical implications for cross-cultural management, IHRM and diversity management in understanding the operation of native categories.

Diversity and gender

Both of native categories and recontextualisation have applications to certain gaps in the diversity-management literature. Jonsen, Maznevski and Schneider (2011), in a comprehensive review article of recent literature in this area, argue that the extant research is limited in its ability to address key issues, and as a result, 'growing tension between the promise and the reality of diversity in team processes and performance has led some scholars to question the relevance of existing research on diversity' (p. 36). They note that diversity management initiatives by American companies in their operations outside the USA often fail for no apparent reason other than vaguely stated differences in national culture (p. 43; see also Nishii and Özbilgin 2007, p. 1886). Furthermore, they observe that the literature ignores differences in definitions and rationales for diversity management in different countries: 'In Japan, for example, companies tend to emphasise corporate social responsibility as a justification for diversity, rather than competitiveness' (p. 42). Finally, they note that the literature does not extensively consider the underlying values and beliefs underpinning diversity management (p. 45). While it is certainly true that the diversity management literature has considered issues of subconscious or unconscious bias since its beginnings (see, for instance, Thomas 1990 or Davison and Punnett 1995), it seldom considers what aspects of the wider culture inform these biases.

This is also highlighted in Nishii and Özbilgin's (2007) article on the possibility of developing global frameworks for diversity management. They note that the variation in concepts of diversity and legal frameworks for diversity management vary so strongly between cultures that cross-cultural diversity management is 'complex and unclear' (p. 1883), as a result of which all companies which operate globally agree that diversity management is important, but few actually practise it. They note a general consensus that an understanding of cross-cultural differences is needed (p. 1884), and that 'the general idea that diversity management approaches developed in one national context may be inappropriate for other national contexts is insufficiently recognised in the academic literature' (p. 1885). I would argue, based on the literature on native categories and especially that on recontextualisation, that it is not enough to understand cross-cultural differences, but to understand how people in different cultures recontextualise concepts adopted from elsewhere.

Identification of research gaps

Three gaps in the literature have therefore been identified, which will be addressed in the present paper. The first is the lack, identified in both Nishii and Özbilgin (2007) and Jonsen et al. (2011), of studies taking cross-cultural differences in conceptions of diversity and diversity management into account. Second, although subconscious bias has been discussed in the literature on diversity management, the effect of the cultural factors which drive these biases are unexplored: Jonsen et al. (2011) note that there has been a lack of consideration of the values and beliefs which underpin diversity management. A consideration of native categories in this context might cast light on this area. Finally, by considering the effect of recontextualisation, we can consider how the cultures involved regard each other and absorb each other's ideas regarding diversity. By considering native categories and recontextualisation in the context of gender diversity, then, we can go some way towards addressing these gaps in the literature.

The fieldsite: Cowley Works

History and characteristics

The plant at which the study was conducted, Cowley Works, was established by a domestic British car manufacturer, Morris Motors, in the early 1910s (Newbigging, Shatford and Williams 1998, p. 12). It was a focus of social activity for its workers, developing its own sports teams, volunteer organisations and clubs (Newbigging et al. 1998; Bardsley and Laing 1999, pp. 86, 95–104). While the company prospered initially (Whisler 1999, pp. 49–52, 342–346), it was hit by the decline which affected industrial Britain from the early 1960s. Nationalised in 1968, it continued to decline, and was reprivatised in the 1980s as part of the Rover Group (chapters 3, 10), owned by BAe (with Honda later acquiring a 20% stake), finally being acquired by BMW in 1994 (Greenhalgh and Kilminster 1993; *Financial Times* 1998). After initially taking a hands-off approach, BMW eventually sold off less profitable parts of the group, but retained Cowley Works as the plant for the construction of the redesigned MINI. Cowley Works, or BMW MINI, is thus an acquired organisation with several lines of cultural integration and fragmentation (see Martin 1992).

Gender at Cowley Works

Women have been employed at Cowley Works from 1915 onwards and, although their numbers dropped sharply in the interwar period, have maintained a continuous presence ever since (Bardsley and Laing 1999). Although the bulk of women were in formally gendered jobs between the wars, they were also employed on the assembly lines, forming one-sixth of the total workforce in 1930 (Sweeney 1993). From 1938 to 1979, women were excluded from working on the lines except in the Body Plant. They were, however, active in trade unions and in the social activities which were focused around the factory during this time, both of which contributed to their gradual acceptance in other areas (Newbigging et al. 1998).

At the time of the study, women formed about 7–10% of the workforce in Assembly (see Table 1; the figure can be taken as indicative only, as statistics are only available for contract workers, who formed approximately one-third of the workforce, the remainder being engaged through temporary labour agencies; my impression working on the line, however, suggested that the percentages were roughly the same for the rest of the workforce as well). On the weekday (alternating) shifts, virtually all seemed either to be

Table 1. Ethnic and gender composition of the plant labour force (2003; permanent contracts only). Respondents selected one term each, thus, for instance, the category 'black' does not also include those who selected 'black Caribbean'.

<i>Ethnic origin</i>	<i>Female</i>	<i>Male</i>	<i>Grand total</i>
Asian	4	59	63
Black	6	54	60
Black Caribbean	0	3	3
Black other	0	1	1
No information available	0	8	8
Oriental	0	4	4
Other	1	21	22
White	52	725	777
White European	2	17	19
White other	0	1	1
White UK	5	133	138
Total	70	1026	1096

Source: Human Resource Department survey.

young, childless women (18–25) or older women (45–65). These demographics are significant, as they suggest that women with preadolescent children are reluctant to work in the plant. There were also, according to the plant's HR managers, more women on the weekend shift and permanent night shift, which are the ones best fitted around childcare duties within the home.

Cowley Works is thus a particularly good site at which to study gender and native categories in cross-cultural management, as it is an MNC subsidiary influenced by both British and German managers, with a long history of employing women, but with an equally long history of gendered labour, and a contemporary problem with recruiting female shop floor workers.

Methodology

Data gathering

This paper is based on participant observation, interviews and archival research at an Anglo-German automobile factory (cf. Leonard-Barton 1990; Ybema, Yanow, Wels and Kamsteeg 2009). The first phase of the study involved three months' participant observation by the above-mentioned researcher on the final assembly line of the Cowley Works plant, plus a series of interviews conducted over the course of six months with 18 staff members (for a more extensive discussion of ethnographic research methodology in a business setting, see Neyland 2008), conducted before and after the period of fieldwork. Initially, only the managers knew about the fieldwork project but the workers on the team were also informed once I had sufficient grasp of the organisation's micropolitics to do so without causing misunderstandings. During fieldwork, rough notes were made during the working day as opportunities arose, which were written up by the fieldworker into reports at the end of each shift. All formal interview participants were interviewed between one and three times (see Table 2 for interviewee demographics). This phase of the study was commissioned by the plant management in part to investigate the reasons why they were having trouble recruiting and retaining female workers. As a result, questions directly related to perceptions of gender and the plant's diversity policies and practices were asked in interviews.

Table 2. Formal interview subjects.

<i>Status</i>	<i>Department</i>	<i>Employer</i>	<i>Approx. age</i>	<i>Gender</i>	<i>Ethnicity</i>
Manager	HR/body in white	Temporary Labour Agency 1	30	Female	White British
Manager	HR/paint	Temporary Labour Agency 2	35	Male	White British
Manager	HR/final assembly	Temporary Labour Agency	28	Female	White British
Manager	HR/final assembly	BMW	28	Male	White British
Manager	HR	BMW	35	Female	White British
Senior manager	General management	BMW	45	Male	White British
Manager	HR	BMW	60	Male	White British
Trainer	Assembly	BMW	50	Male	White British
Trainer	Assembly	BMW	40	Male	White British
Team coordinator	Paint	BMW	40	Male	Asian British
Process area manager	Paint	BMW	45	Male	White British
Process area manager	Paint	BMW	35	Male	White British
Team coordinator	Paint	BMW	45	Male	White British
Student	Final assembly	Temporary Labour Agency 3	21	Male	Asian British
Manager	HR/German plant	BMW	35	Male	White German
Manager	General management/ German plant	BMW	40	Male	White German
Manager	Engineering/German plant	BMW	45	Male	White German
Manager	HR/German plant	BMW	35	Male	White German

The second phase, which began almost immediately after the completion of the first, involved 18 months intermittently working with managers from the HR department on two related projects, one involving the development of a management education programme based on ethnographic techniques, and one aimed at assessing and improving the plant's extant management culture, which allowed me the opportunity to expand and triangulate my results from the earlier study. This phase included attending five meetings in the plant, plus a visit to BMW's plant in Regensburg, Bavaria. Group interviews were conducted with six managers and team leaders in the UK, and individual or pair interviews with five managers in Germany. The interviews were then transcribed in detail by the researcher who had conducted them. As before, rough notes were taken during each visit to either plant, which were written up into detailed reports. In this phase of the study, questions were asked relating to the origin and nature of the plant's culture, and of the similarities and differences between the German and British managers at the plant and in the firm as a whole. The firm did not ask for confidentiality, and, given its unique position in the market, it would be impossible to conceal its identity; however, for partial confidentiality, I have disguised the identities of participants.

Data analysis methods

The resulting data were analysed using close reading techniques by the researcher, who took a reflexive approach to the findings. Data were initially coded in the writing process, as the researcher ascertained which events were significant when compiling rough notes, and then their significance was further tested and explored during the process of writing each day's report. The resulting data were then formally coded in a qualitative manner, through the researcher selecting 10 major categories of interest, colour-coding relevant data according to these categories, and then going further to identify sub-categories within the major categories, again colour-coding for ease of analysis. This allowed the analyst to identify trends and themes within the interviews and observation sessions, which could be correlated between interviews and observation sessions, and over time, but also to focus in on particularly interesting or significant examples within the data set. Data and interpretations were also presented to colleagues from different disciplines, and the discussions helped in the development of the analysis.

Findings: gender as native category in BMW MINI

British native categories and gender

The findings of my initial study were that the main barrier to recruiting women to work at the plant had to do with British 'native categories' regarding women's work, particularly in areas traditionally the purview of the British 'working class'. Although the plant's workforce had at least some workers of middle-class origin (due largely to the presence of recent immigrants to the UK, and students from the two local universities), I would estimate, based on the demographics in [Table 1](#) and on observation of the population, that most of the workforce were of working-class origin. Historically, working-class labour has been strongly gendered in the UK, as witness Oakley (1974), Yeandle (1984), Dennis, Henriques and Slaughter (1956) and Westwood (1984). The historical accounts of women at Cowley Works indicate a similarly gendered division of labour. Although factory work is clearly not exclusively a male purview (as witness Westwood 1984), the labour men and women do seem to be differentiated.

Although automotive plants are clean environments requiring workers in a variety of physical types, conversations with British academic colleagues and informants suggested that most people's image of the automotive industry is of hard, 'dirty' work unsuited for women. When I spoke with colleagues at the university about working on a final assembly line in an automobile plant, the general reaction was surprise that 'a little woman' would be capable of doing such a job (I am 163 centimetres tall, average height for a woman in the UK, and muscular). Although the university community could be argued to be unrepresentative, similar discourses prevailed among working-class colleagues: one of the women with whom I took the entrance interview, whose accent placed her in the working class, and whose previous jobs included 20 years at a printing plant (meaning she was familiar with factory work), said to me upon seeing the other candidates: 'we don't stand a chance, with all those big strong men'. Furthermore, university colleagues are exposed to working-class attitudes and norms through popular culture and through residence and work in the Oxford area; many students live in the Cowley community, and take unskilled or semi-skilled work to earn money in the holidays. This is supported by the fact that the assumption that automotive work was a masculine domain seemed to persist among labourers at Cowley even though, as noted, a significant minority of the workforce were not of British working-class origin, suggesting a dominance effect from the local community (Smith and Meiksins 1995), in which the views of one particular group in an organisation are unconsciously given priority by others.

Recruiters also do not always encourage women to think in terms of factory work. I had registered with the temporary labour agency which staffed Final Assembly 12 months before the project started, seeking to obtain summer-vacation employment, but I was never asked whether I would consider doing manual or unskilled labour, and the jobs which were recommended to me were generally of a clerical or secretarial type. While there may have been a class element to this recommendation, given that I am a university graduate, the labour agencies did not appear to have a bias in this regard, given that I encountered several university graduates and students while working on the line. I am also non-British, and, as Fox (2004) notes, foreigners tend to have an ambiguous place in the British class system. There was a strong preconception that women working in the industry would be subject to sexism and harassment from male colleagues; this was not without basis, although, while I did experience sexism, I did not experience hostility or harassment. Despite these preconceptions, my own experience was that the Final Assembly Area is a clean environment, a number of jobs exist which do not require brute strength and the behaviour of male associates was generally courteous. These preconceptions mean that many women do not even consider applying, let alone accepting a job on the line.

This was reflected in the imagery which surrounded women in Cowley Works. Most of the official images around the factory showed women as visitors and managers rather than as workers: for instance, two placards at the front of the assembly area illustrating correct attire for line staff and visitors depicted the former as male and the latter as female: an idealised diorama at the front of the plant depicted an all-male group of workers observed by a female visitor. That this was a generally accepted aspect of factory life was reflected by the fact that male workers at the plant, although they criticised the lack of *ethnic* diversity shown in the diorama, nonetheless defended the depiction of the woman as visitor, with one colleague, who had mocked the diorama as 'not ethnically representative', saying, when I pointed out that it was not reflective of gender roles either, 'well, most women here are visitors' (see Moore 2012).

When their work in automobile factories is acknowledged, also, women's roles are gendered. Historically, women at Cowley Works were restricted to jobs seen as 'female',

such as sewing and installing upholstery (Sweeney 1993). The protagonists of the British film *Made In Dagenham* (2010), based on a true story about a group of female automobile factory workers who successfully challenged discrimination, were sewing machinists rather than assembly-line workers (the film also takes great pains to emphasise the characters' femininity, as if anticipating that the audience's image of automobile factory work is 'masculine'). The job which I was assigned on the assembly line was seen as stereotypically 'female', which was explained to me as being because it required small size, dexterity and the ability to multitask; however, another team member who did the same job was a small and dextrous man, and two other team members, both men who were over two metres tall, also had learned the job and done it in the past. However, neither of the latter two men were keen to admit to this, and the former man, who was doing the job at the time I worked on the line, was keen to be reassigned to a more 'masculine' task. Women and men were thus assigned factory work based on stereotypical gender characteristics relating to native categories of femininity and masculinity, despite the fact that such stereotypes were also routinely broken in practice.

The case of women in Cowley Works thus demonstrated that both women and men, managers and workers, were subconsciously influenced by tacit native categories in terms of how factory work was viewed, and which jobs were seen as suitable for women and men, as in the case of the temporary labour agencies approach to recruitment. Exceptions to the perceived rule, furthermore, were rationalised through re-categorisation, such as women automobile factory workers being accepted if they were doing 'female' jobs, the emphasis on the femininity of the *Made in Dagenham* characters and women being categorised as 'mostly visitors'. As the gender issue was raised through a diversity management initiative supported by the German management, which failed among the British workforce, we shall now consider how German native categories were recontextualised in the light of the acquisition by BMW.

The recontextualisation of German native categories

This situation also reflected issues of recontextualisation of native categories. Although the laws regarding gender equality are similar in principle in both Britain and Germany, and while the Regensburg plant also appeared to be dominated by male employees, the representation of workers in plant-related imagery included an equal number of female as male figures, with both being presented as workers. German HR managers also emphasised the need to accommodate the work–life balance issues of female workers, such as by the provision of paid maternity leave and flexible working. BMW itself had launched a series of initiatives aimed at encouraging young women towards careers in engineering shortly before my own research started, indicating that they were committed to gender equality at all levels of the organisation, and it was a German manager, an expatriate in the UK, who commissioned my own study on gender recruitment; I did not propose the study to the company. The Germans' concern with the British difficulties in recruiting women, particularly given that, to judge by what I saw in Regensburg, the Germans also had a lack of women in their own factory labour force, thus suggested that the native categories surrounding gender and factory work were different in the British context.

This is reflected in the wider literature on gender and work in the German context. According to Borneman (1991, 1992), many of the modern German attitudes to gender and work were formulated in the aftermath of WWII, when both East and West Germany had an unusually large number of female-headed households, due to the effects of the war on

the male population. It was also influenced by the post-war German ideal of egalitarianism: the idea that, from 1945, the country could develop a new culture, wiping away an older hierarchical order and replacing it with one which is fairer (Watson 1995). This also had an effect on traditional class divisions, which have persisted in the UK (Fox 2004). It is worth noting that this is true for both East and West Germany, though the egalitarianism took different forms in different contexts (see Borneman 1991). There is a lot of German legislation aimed at making it easier for women to work in all areas (see Watson 1995); many of my interviewees commented on the long length of maternity leave in Germany relative to the UK. Thus, although, as in the UK, German women do not tend to work in automobile factories, the attitudes and behaviour at the Regensburg plant, and among the German top management at Cowley works, reflected an idea that women *should be able to* work in factories, and that a multi-gendered workforce is something to work towards. This would suggest that German native categories relating to female car factory workers are superficially similar to, but practically different from, British ones. Although automobile factory work may also be a male-dominated activity in Germany, the German native categories derived from my informants and from reading literature on work in Germany emphasised that the ideal was a mixed-gendered workforce. Furthermore, the idea that the factory workers form a part of ‘working-class culture’ was less explicit; the Germans did not tend to talk about the workforce in class terms, and one manager who did was hostile to the notion, saying ‘The culture of [Cowley Works] was terrible. The managers all stayed in their nice buildings, their nice offices, and never went to the line, never talked to the people at the line, *there was these class differences*’ (emphasis added). The term ‘classes’, furthermore, while a common part of discourse in the UK, is not generally used in Germany, and the term is regarded as somewhat old-fashioned, with Germans normally talking in terms of ‘social stratification’ instead.

While the British HR managers, temporary labour agency managers and the workforce were aware that the Germans wanted to recruit more women workers, this intention was recontextualised, not so much as diversity management (as the expatriate managers intended), but as part of corporate social responsibility (CSR). BMW was presented by employees at all levels very much as a socially responsible, community-engaged company, with people in both the workforce and the wider community speaking favourably of its support for volunteer fire brigades, factory-wide blood drives, local sports teams and so forth (see Moore 2007). HR managers mentioned the fact that the company subsidised nursery provision for employees’ children as an aspect of this. However, when I asked HR managers and shop floor managers about diversity in working teams, they all interpreted the question initially as referring to ethnic diversity (with one shop floor manager also mentioning age), and usually had to be asked about gender as a separate issue:

I don’t know how many but there was one [Process Area Manager’s] area – that’s 40 people or so – which had 17 different nationalities. Afro-Caribbean, Indian subcontinent are most; some Chinese, a rising number of Eastern Europeans. I haven’t seen many Afghans, but I’m sure they’re on their way. (Male HR manager, late 20s, White British)

The sole exception was a female HR manager, who, again, mostly focused on ethnic diversity when I asked about specific instances of diversity management, and whose mention of women put them firmly in the ‘management’ category, and therefore not part of shop floor diversity:

I mean we have very different people working here, like across every level of the business. We have a lot of Indians, a lot of Asians, a lot of Afro-Caribbeans, more Kosovars and Albanians In our management level we have females, not so many females, but we have females, we

have Afro-Caribbean managers, we have English managers, we have German managers, there's a huge sort of diversity to work here. (Female HR manager, 30s, White British)

There was also a shop floor manager who mentioned gender briefly in passing:

[Interviewer: I'd like to ask about diversity in the workforce?] Um, I'm trying to think how many different countries and cultures are represented in *my* small team, you know it's quite a number, but people of African descent, Afro-Caribbean, Asian, and, um, from a number of different countries around Europe, um, I've got a Portuguese girl, I did have somebody from New Zealand, you know, so yeah, very, very wide representation culturally. (Process Area Manager, Paint, 40s, White British) Hence, the German attempts to introduce their own categories of gender and work, through announcing that they intended to improve gender diversity, through the outreach to female schoolchildren, and through determining how best to change attitudes on the line, did not meet with hostility or acceptance on the part of the British workforce, but were tacitly re-categorised in a way which diminished their relevance to local categories of gender and class, by considering them as community engagement rather than diversity management, or, as with the female HR manager, absorbing them into the local native categories, acknowledging gender as a diversity issue but only at management level. Others recontextualised them by turning the agency on to the workers: two HR managers, asked about the shift system, mentioned women with children choosing the night or weekend shifts deliberately so as to work around childcare responsibilities. They also tended to include this as a 'lifestyle choice' issue, along the lines of working a second job:

The weekend shift is probably made up mostly of agency labour or people with families, so that tends to be the preference there, and we do know people who have jobs like taxi driving which they do during the week, which is fine, so long as they can make their shift and do quality at work here, so it really depends on their circumstances, quite a lot of women work on the weekend shift as well. (Female HR manager, 30s, White British)

Looking at native categories and recontextualisation in the case of BMW, and how they affected attitudes to women working on the line, thus casts some light on the reasons why cross-border diversity management initiatives more generally can be particularly difficult to implement: because, first, there may be a semiotic conflict between headquarters and local native categories of diversity, and, second, because such concepts and initiatives may be subject to recontextualisation, meaning that the initiative can meet no local hostility, and may even be regarded by local managers and workers as a good thing, without it actually making a significant difference to workforce native categories or traditional practices. While the final report for this project circulated among top management and the managers of the temporary labour agencies, and while changes were made to recruitment and training programmes as a result, the impact on gender ratios in the plant is unknown.

Discussion and conclusions

The case of Cowley Works thus strongly suggests that tacit native categories have an impact on management practice, in that British native categories about women and work clearly affected efforts on the part of German expatriate managers to recruit women into the factory, and to make women themselves feel that they were an accepted and valued part of the workforce, rather than an anomalous group who would not normally form part of it.

Furthermore, it indicates that the recontextualisation of native categories has an impact on management practice, as the German expatriate managers' native categories in this area caused them to see the lack of women in the MINI factory as an issue which needed to be addressed, in line with the German native categories on gender in the workforce, but their tacit nature meant that they were not, themselves, able to easily identify the source of the

problem. Therefore, they commissioned an ethnographic study involving a female researcher working on the line, to determine if there were any aspects of factory work which were keeping women away. This was also complicated by the nature of the British class system, which, as Fox (2004) notes, is difficult even for insiders to the culture to fully comprehend. The British managers' and workers' recontextualisation of the initiatives into CSR activities more so than as diversity management (while the two concepts are not mutually exclusive, the focus was more on CSR than on diversity management here) meant that, in practice, these initiatives had little practical impact on the recruitment of women.

The study's results suggest, therefore, that native categories provide one reason why diversity management initiatives can fail to transfer, or why the introduction of, for instance, affirmative action schemes may produce little practical result bar, as Thomas (1990) observes, recruiting a lot of minority hires to entry-level positions. Native categories do not, therefore, just have an impact on management practice as noted by Buckley and Chapman (1997) and Harris (2000), but also the differences between them affect cross-cultural HR management and the recontextualisation of native categories. Nishii and Özbilgin (2007, p. 1888) argue that 'unless HR practices, broadly speaking, are designed with sensitivity towards and understanding of possible cultural differences, attempts to implement global diversity and inclusion practices are likely to be met with resistance'. However, the Cowley Works study suggests that it is not just sensitivity to cultural differences which must be taken into account, but tacit aspects of those cultures which, because of their tacit nature, may be difficult for managers to identify. The implications for HR management are thus that managers involved in cross-cultural management activities, particularly regarding diversity, need to be aware of the existence of native categories, recontextualisation and their potential impact on cross-cultural management and the implementation of diversity management policies.

The implications for researchers are that more work needs to be done on the impact of native categories on cross-cultural management. This study also confirms the literature cited above (e.g. Brannen 2004; Osland and Osland 2005), which notes that empirical measures of 'culture distance' or Hofstedeian categories may not necessarily be a good guide to whether or not a concept or practice can be successfully absorbed by a workforce, as Germany and Britain tend to have fairly similar scores in such indices (see, for instance, Hofstede 1980), and yet subtle, unspoken differences in their native categories hampered the transfer of practice in this case. There also needs to be consideration of how recontextualisation in the light of *local* native categories can generate new patterns of meaning. Finally, however, researchers also need to be aware that, as Buckley and Chapman (1997) note, management literature itself can inform the native categories of managers, creating a feedback effect whereby studies of management reinforce social norms and unchallenged concepts in management practice, which in turn are reflected in management practice, and so on and so forth.

The limitations of this study are that this is a single, primarily qualitative, case study; although it confirms the findings of earlier work on recontextualisation, more research in this area is needed before significant generalisations can be drawn. In particular, research on native categories is thus far fairly limited, suggesting that more investigation of their impact on business and management, in other areas within HRM and beyond, might be useful. This study is also necessarily limited to a single native category, due to the exigencies of space: inclusion, and detailed examination, of other categories than gender, for instance ethnicity and class, might also yield interesting results. Furthermore, there should be greater integration of the concept of recontextualisation into cross-cultural management studies, and a greater recognition that it can generate false positives (as in

Graham's [1995] study, of an American factory which appeared to be following the Japanese version of lean production, but in practice managers and workers were actually doing their own local variation on it) or, equally, false negatives (as in Brannen [2004], in which it is indicated that the failure of Disneyland Paris was not that the Disneyland concept could not be exported to Europe, but that those responsible for the export were emphasising the wrong aspects of the Disney oeuvre in developing the park). More research on recontextualisation, native categories and cross-cultural management are thus needed, as is a greater consideration of the process of recontextualisation in cross-cultural management.

In sum, then, British native categories about gender and work had a negative impact on the recruitment and retention of women at BMW MINI. Furthermore, the fact that the difficulties recruiting and retaining women were perceived as a problem at all was down to the influence of German native categories on the plant's management. More research thus needs to be done on the operation of such tacit phenomena in managerial settings, particularly as regards their impact on diversity management and cross-cultural management. The Cowley Works study thus casts light on the perennial IHRM issue of why cross-cultural diversity management issues often fail for no apparent reason, even between countries with relatively similar scores on quantitative 'dimensions of culture' indices, and suggests ways in which managers can become more aware of these hidden barriers to the transfer of policy and practice.

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