Queer organising and performativity: Towards a norm-critical conceptualisation of organisational intersectionality*

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abstract

This paper addresses recent debates of critical performativity and queer theory in critical management studies to develop new, norm-critical methods for critical diversity management. It does so by reading across these debates and, in particular, engaging with the concept of intersectionality. This concept dislocates attention from one diversity category to multiple categories, and how they, by their intersections, produce specific identities and power relations. Building on this, and through empirical observations of norm-critical workshop facilitation in two case organisations, the paper develops a norm-critical method for visualising intersecting diversity categories while, at the same time, transgressing them in order to acknowledge difference without having it fixed as such – presented as ephemeral moments of intersectionality. In addition to illustrating how a reflexive approach to underlying structures of norms in (an) organisation can also render visible unmarked categories of power and privilege, the author discusses possible implications of the suggested norm-critical method of intervention for research and practices of diversity management, with emphasis on the kind of critique that is performed.

Introduction

This paper addresses seemingly deadlocked discussions in critical management studies (CMS) about organisational intersectionality. On the one hand, the mainstream functionalist approach to diversity in organisation and management studies (OMS) is criticised for being performative. Its critical counterpart is, on the other hand, criticised for its non-performative intent, that is to say, for taking a diametrical opposition to performative managerialism (Parker and Parker, 2017). In other words, CMS criticises the use of diversity, including a lack of analytical sensitivity towards intersectional issues in OMS, but is itself criticised for not mobilising in practice the insights that the criticism brings about. I will in this introductory section provide a brief summary of this academic debate and, in line with other critical diversity scholars, problematise the absence of employee diversity in organisations while simultaneously outlining crucial shortcomings to the ways diversity as difference is traditionally conceptualised in the OMS literature in essentialist terms. The essentialist approach remains blind to how power, history and culture form particular gendered, raced, classed and sexed perceptions of workers (Ahonen et al., 2014). These structured discourses place certain expectations on individual behaviour based on what is normalised and becomes the norm for a given socially constructed category (Ashcraft, 2013).

It is well established in OMS that diversity, if managed properly, can lead to improved organisational performance (e.g. Williams and Mavin, 2014; Qin et al., 2014). Companies are, following this modernist rationale, thought to be able to improve their economic bottom lines by actively valuing socio-demographic differences among their employees (e.g. Lorbiecki and Jack, 2000; Cox and Blake, 1991). Consequently, diversity management is turned into a strategic approach to human resource management (HRM), as organising diversity becomes a means to successfully attaining corporate goals (Lorbiecki and Jack, 2000).

It is, however, also a well-known fact within CMS that such a functionalist business case approach to diversity tends to hide power relations by 'naturalising diversity as a group's universal fixed essence' (Zanoni and Janssens, 2003: 57), based on the assumption that the ascribed socio-demographic characteristics are constitutive for these essences. It is, as a result, 'assume[d] that diversity is a universal and objective fact that can be described, measured, and used' (*ibid.*), meaning diversity is conceived of as reality in contemporary organisations rather than as a social construct reflecting existing power relations. Thus, the extant critical diversity literature calls out a built-in sameness-difference dilemma, since employee diversity is either assimilated or marginalised (Ghorashi and Sabelis, 2013; Shore et al., 2011). In both cases, diversity remains invisible and an idle force of exclusion-inclusion mechanisms in organisational settings.

From a critical and post-structural, rather than a universal and objective, perspective, diversity becomes a social construction (Holck et al., 2016). The way people are perceived as either same or different therefore depends on local subjective and relational perceptions (Ghorashi and Sabelis, 2013). Lorbiecki and Jack (2000) demonstrate how the structures and discourses change across time and place, while Zanoni and Janssens (2007) make it clear that organisational interest in diversity is an identity-regulating factor that implies power dynamics at all times and in any context, albeit in ever-changing ways (Schwabenland and Tomlinson, 2015). The meaning of 'critical' in critical diversity studies has in this way come to denote exposure of and reflection upon established ideas and modes of organising with an emancipatory potential that is, generally speaking, yet to be realised.

Performative diversity management, defined as forms of knowledge production exclusively serving economic efficiency (Cabantous et al., 2016), is, in other words, found to be prone to marginalise employees by reinforcing stereotypes and prejudices that provoke and widen gaps between people. As attention is paid – literally speaking – to the business imperative, the broader picture is neglected; aspects of social justification, such as issues of identity and power, are disguised. The point is that the practice of managing diversity becomes performative in actively producing socio-demographic differences in the workforce, and that these differences are not necessarily relevant a priori the process of organising diversity, but are rather products of the power-laden operations of the focal organisation (Janssens and Zanoni, 2005). Yet, if mainstream – that is to say, instrumental – diversity management is performative, there is reason to believe that a critical approach to organising diversity can become (critically) performative too.

Queering intersectionality: A norm-critical way forward?

Intersectionality, in this regard, seems to fall short as a heuristic framework for intervention, since intersectionality always-already relies on working with the very same categories that a critically performative approach has as its foreground to queer in the rejection of 'normal', resisting any one definition of diversity, insisting on multiplicity instead (Pullen et al., 2016a). Queering, as Parker (2002: 148; see also 2016) puts it, is 'an attitude of unceasing disruptiveness', which is at the heart of critical deconstruction of demographic categories and knowledge, thereby breaking with the repetition of the 'normalised' (Muhr et al., 2016; Muhr and Sullivan, 2013). The crucial argument for queering such categories is that they 'obscure differential experiences and re-affirm existing inequalities' (King, 2016: 9). As recently noted by Ashcraft and Muhr (2017), these categories often depend on constructed dualisms, e.g. the gender binary of women/men where both appear to be mutually exclusive, since the binary understanding of diversity asserts

oppositional poles of privilege and disadvantage, respectively, where, citing Dougherty and Hode (2016: 1731), 'the privileged poles of binaries sets tend to be linked to other privileged poles' and vice versa. Moreover, such dichotomous understandings of diversity foreclose intersectional experiences.

If we as scholars are to engage with intersectional realities in organisations, and if such an engagement is to have any critically performative outcome, the question is how to work with categorisations while simultaneously overriding them, that is to say, how to 'visiblise' (e.g. Widerberg, 2000) multiple and intersecting social identities without simultaneously reducing them as such. In a concluding remark, Holck and Muhr (2017: 10) recently suggested a norm-critical way forward, with which they wish to nurture 'critical awareness of the latent danger of fixing differences to the detriment of the skills and experiences a diverse group of employees brings to the organisations, while keeping in mind the value of recognizing differences'. The question then is how to work in such a norm-critical manner. If we buy into the critical argument for transgressing the categories, then we have to understand how the categories come into the picture in the first place. That is, we must move beyond objectifying categories and, in their place, explicate the social relations – the norms – that rule people's knowing and doing in organisational settings (Campbell, 2016).

The purpose of this paper is to examine what it would entail to approach organisational intersectionality norm critically by including the power of normalisation, i.e. by continuously challenging the explicit and implicit norms that underlie organisational practices and that structure social relations, standards and expectations (Ghorashi and Ponzoni, 2014). The argument put forward in this paper, in a nutshell, is that intersectionality is an important leap forward, from paying attention to one category at a time, to attending to several categories and their interrelated flows of power at once, but that the next step – moving from investigation to intervention as well as from a performative/non-performative dichotomy to critical performativity – is to reject categorisation (or at least keep it in suspense) by means of continuous critical reflection on underlying norms of organisational intersectionality. I by no means intend to replace intersectionality studies with norm critique. Rather, I want to suggest that norm critique is a method with which one can analyse the effects of what I in the analysis suggest to be ephemeral moments of intersectionality while intervening in existing organisational practices and managerial discourses of diversity.

The research aim of this paper is to conceptualise norm critique based on a combined reading of queer theory and critical performativity, and subsequently to illustrate empirically how to advance norm-critical methods for intervention following such critically performative queer theory. In merging queer theory with

critical performativity, arriving at a queer performativity that is open to organisational realities of intersectionality, I move on to clarify what constitutes a critical norm, after which I elaborate on the kind of critique that is performed. Norm critique, as presented in this paper, takes inspiration from organisations whose members experience the discrimination and repression associated with the intersections of multiple identities. This could be considered an 'intersectional' research approach to the extent that the study is conducted with the influence of the people it is about (see e.g. IGLYO, 2014). I will for that reason reflect upon the empirical context and background of this study in connection with the analytical illustrations. In addition to illustrating how a reflexive approach to underlying structures of norms in organisations can render unmarked categories as well as intersecting diversity categories visible while, at the same time, transgressing them in order to acknowledge difference without it being fixed as such, I discuss possible implications of the suggested norm-critical method for research and practices of diversity management.

Queer performativity as ephemeral intersectionality

This section positions norm critique as the interplay of queer theory and critical performativity – queer performativity in short. I subscribe to the work of Pullen et al. (2016b) in arguing that queer is a form of immanent critique, as queering entails a rejection of categorical thinking – hence the potential for critical performativity and for exploring emerging, ephemeral moments of intersectionality.

Practitioners and researchers alike have to various extents relied on putting workers into neat and tidy demographic groups for convenience samples, which is probably why Nkomo and Hoobler (2014) describe the diversity literature as being almost deaf to the reality of intersectionality. Attending to one category at a time is, from an intersectional perspective, insufficient if we want to understand multiple intersecting processes of identification, meaning that simply listing the accumulated effects of each category is not an option either. Queering is, in that regard, not a question of 'neutralising' the binaries that currently inform subjectivity intersectionally, e.g. the gender binary man/woman, by introducing an alleged 'third' position, which is one form of multiplicity as laid out in extant literature (e.g. Linstead and Pullen, 2006). Nor is it an attempt at replacing 'old' categories with new ones. This would arguably be a form of multiplicity as sameness in the sense that subjectivity is still limited to binary conceptions, e.g. masculinities and femininities, albeit acknowledging a plural understanding as opposed to masculinity and femininity in the singular form. The queer pose is as such one that withstands the closure inherent in the binary logic of being either/or

(it would, in rejecting categorisation, rather be neither/nor), because queering, ontologically speaking, suggests being as both/and, i.e. endless becomings of differences (Ashcraft and Muhr, 2017).

Accordingly, this paper is not discussing a queer position in the definitive form, or in any absolute sense, or as something one is because queer is never one (Just et al., 2017; Pullen et al., 2016a). On the contrary, it is the active, dynamic (as in non-static) form of queer*ing* that is the point of departure, meaning queer is not something one is (constative); it is something one *does* (performative) and then becomes, although such queerness is, for the same reason, difficult to uphold. That would, in principle, be an endless practice of queering, and hence of becoming, as the queerness would otherwise become identical with itself and thus, strictly speaking, cease to be queer.

Queering or queerness puts into practice Butler's assertion that discursive categories, including gender and sexuality, are performative in constituting what they name (King, 2016):

> [Gender] is thus not the product of choice, but the forcible citation of a *norm*, one whose complex historicity is indissociable from relations of discipline, regulation, punishment. Indeed, there is not 'one' who takes on a gender norm. On the contrary, this citation of the gender norm is necessary in order to qualify as a 'one', to become viable as a 'one', where subject-formation is dependent on the prior operation of legitimating gender norms. (Butler, 2011/1993: 266, emphasis added)

Individuals must, to put it differently, repeat and thereby produce norms to be recognised as individuals, or as professionals, at a workplace. There is, however, more to the quote, namely that norms do not exist outside their repetitions (Just et al., 2017), meaning norms depend just as much on the repetition as individuals do if the norms are to obtain a persisting false naturalness. Governing social norms are, from this point of view, something we install collectively as enough of us – a majority – perpetuate them through continuous repetitions. This also implies that there is a critical performative potential for action, for change, if the norms are repeated with alterity. Subversion of the norm is by no means guaranteed, as repetitions with a difference might as well fail in denaturalising norms (Allen, 1998) – a case of failed performativity (Fleming and Banerjee, 2015). But queering, as practised by the organisations presented in this paper, is not necessarily a question of introducing new normativities. Rather, queering is about being open to the intersectional experiences of others.

As Parker and Parker (2017) point out, critical performativity – as spearheaded by Spicer et al. (2016; 2009) – rests on a Butlerian reading of discourse conditioning performativity. Discourse captures vital aspects of dominant organisational

activity, is useful for empirical analysis and is, for those two reasons, apt for a critical performative view on organisations (Alvesson and Kärreman, 2011), not to mention the act of organising diversity. Trittin and Schoenborn (2015), for instance, show how a discursive perspective on diversity may help to shift focus away from the individual-bound demographic criteria applied in the seemingly contradictive performative/non-performative traditions of diversity management. Instead, the authors theorise how diversity can be understood as a form of discursive representation where different voices become visible and present in organisations. However, as the authors also mention, whether different voices get to contribute to the discursive diversity of organisations depends on the degree to which these voices can also voice difference *structurally* in organisational settings.

Viewing diversity as discourse furthermore helps to explain why some diversity objectives are not met when diversity communication is kept from being performative, critically, due to the constative nature of much diversity reporting (for an example of this, see Christensen and Muhr, 2017). In such cases there tends to be incongruence between talk and action. However, this suggests a static relationship that only pays lip service to temporality. Diversity initiatives could, as is the case with CSR initiatives in Christensen et al. (2013), be seen as 'aspirational talk', i.e. a communicated desired place to be, meaning discrepancies between talk and action are inevitable – and perhaps even desirable. Such aspirational talk would, potentially, allow for new organisational subjectivities to emerge by means of 'talking into existence' (Wickert and Schaefer, 2014) new spaces for different realities that make available new subject positions to speak from. As Cabantous et al. (2016: 197) point out, the constitution of subjects 'is an inherently material and discursive construct, and happens through the political engineering of sociomaterial agencements', and it is this insight that takes us back to the Butlerian understanding of discourse as the very condition of performativity.

Alvesson and Kärreman (2011; see also 2000) problematise a sole focus on discursive practice that leaves the non-discursive unattended to, which is why this paper takes a particular interest in the governing social norms that discourse – presumably – is anchored in. If performativity is conditioned by discourse, subjects are, by inference, constituted by discourse, although not necessarily discursively determined. This is the assertion of critical performativity (Nentwich et al., 2015). If 'identity is performatively constituted by the very "expressions" that are said to be its results' (Butler, 1990: 34), the logical conclusion is that being – in any emancipatory sense of the word – entails doing differently, i.e. allowing for variation to enter the repetition. In order to be critical and avoid 'failed performativities' (Fleming and Banerjee, 2015), critical performativity has to include the studied organisation in its 'entirety', as it not only constitutes

organisational subjects; it is also itself performatively constituted (Cabantous et al., 2016). Thus, in taking forward critical performativity:

> [W]e cannot assume that managers (or employees, shareholders, etc.) are unitary subjects who can change themselves. Rather, they are complex subjects moving between subject positions where identity and agency is performatively constituted within and through different circulating discourses [...] Thus, a political theory of performativity needs to understand and then change the terms within and through which subjects constitute identities within organisational subject positions. That is, we should not focus only on change to spoken words, but to the identity-constituting, *norm*-infested discourses that precede subjects. (Cabantous et al., 2016: 205, emphasis added)

A critically performative methodology must, for that reason, 'undo' organisational performativity, which, as suggested by Riach et al. (2016), can be done through 'anti-narrative' research. This entails reflexive undoing of organisational subjectivities and the very normative conditions upon which these subjectivities depend. The raison d'être of the methodology is its applicability in revealing the processes and governmental norms by which workplace subjectivities are shaped – a process that also allows us to tap into the identity work that goes into presenting oneself as an intelligible organisational subject:

> As such, a reflexive undoing must contrast with a more performative, organisational undoing in revealing lived experiences of being subject to the 'rules and *norms*' we are required to conform to 'if we are to exist' not simply in a physical sense, but as viable, social subjects, within and through organisational settings. (*ibid.*: 7, emphasis added)

Hence, this approach of norm-critical performativity allows for examination of the normative conditions of organisational recognition as well as the consequences of misrecognition (*ibid.*), and, in doing so, opens up a discursive space for change. Actionable knowledge, i.e. applied norm-critical research, entails what Fleming and Spicer (2003) describe as a shift in focus from qualities within employees to *externalities*. The object of inquiry is one's approach to diversity, not diversity itself. This has the potential to open doors to other practices of diversity with an emancipatory perspective otherwise shut down by the dominant direction of current diversity production emanating from the financial imperative (Omanović, 2013).

A practical example of 'externalising' the problem is found in Staunæs and Søndergaard (2008a: 4-5), where the authors explain in detail how they created a space for organisational reflexivity by articulating a new language, a new way of narrating the corporate reality, with new possibilities for action. For instance, instead of subscribing to a binary (common-sensical) understanding that reduces genders to 'women' and 'men', the researchers constructed a neologism of

'managers in female and male bodies', which allowed them to also discuss the intersectionalities of male bonding, masculinities and (referring to ethnic-racialised hierarchies) cultural cloning. While Staunæs and Søndergaard are careful not to conclude that their research was indeed performative critically (they talk about *usefulness* from different epistemological positions), it arguably resulted in discursive openings from queering (*troubling* in their words) the binary distinction of women and men. The queer pose shed light on a company norm for management that displaced women and men alike who failed to perform masculinity correctly (that is to say in a manner congruous with their bodies) and as such deviated from the norm – in other words, how management as a discipline was gendered. Moreover, whiteness and social and professional background were found to be embedded in the masculinity norm. Queering, therefore, seems to be imperative if diversity work is to become 'useful' in the critically performative sense of the word and not simply confirm and reproduce existing underlying normative rationalities in organisations.

Norm critique and its critical potential for intersectional organisation studies

In continuation of the above theorisation of norm critique, this paper will go one step further in also advancing norm-critical methods as they may manifest following such critically performative queer theory. Norm critique, I contend, is the form a critically performative queering may take in practice and as a method for intervention.

Defining organisational norms

To comprehend this conceptual framework, we must first investigate what constitutes a critical norm and how it works. Norms can be (and are in the work of both case organisations) defined as unwritten – in some cases written – rules and expectations that become precepts for behaviour. Norms should therefore *not* be thought of as certain standards, e.g. espoused values and beliefs, as is commonly the case if, for instance, applying the cultural perspective of Schein (2004). The point is that norms are constituted performatively as they are continually repeated in, by and through organisation(s) and, consequently, become normalised. Social norms thereby establish a sort of business-as-usual as the 'normal' thing to do, including how to conduct yourself in given situations at work if you are to be recognised as a – using Butler's (2011/1993) terminology – 'viable one'. In that sense, you become a subject *of* organisation. This understanding of norms aligns better with what Schein (2004) defines as basic underlying assumptions, since the norms appear as the (only) 'natural' thing to do in a specific (work) context. This

is not the same as saying that norms cannot be expressed in espoused values and beliefs, merely that established ideas and norms work at a 'deeper' level. They come to function as self-evident ways of doing things in particular situations and have implications for identity construction (Alvesson and Willmott, 2002) when, for instance, feeding into the social categories to which individuals are ascribed. Consequently, norms are taken for granted, as they are naturalised over time and therefore become invisible to the naked eye – or at least difficult to spot – until someone breaks with the norm in failing to perform in accordance with the organisational expectations that a given norm gives birth to.

Take this sentence as a somewhat banal, yet illustrative, example. You probably noticed that it is written in a colour that makes the font stand out in comparison to the paragraphs above. Your exposure to the unusual choice of colour for the text probably made you aware of the fact that texts are normally printed in black, the point being that you weren't giving it much of a thought until just now. Presented with a text that deviates from the default colour code, however, made you painfully aware of the font colour norm, black, and you most likely have an opinion about whether it's right or wrong of me to use different colours in academic writing. Maybe it makes my work appear a little frivolous. Perhaps it's desirable for different reasons. Regardless, to avoid sanctions (in this case questions from perplexed reviewers, not meeting the standard requirements for publication, etc.), surely it'd be easier for me simply to adhere to the norm and it wouldn't be 'abnormal' to receive that recommendation, e.g. from a reviewer or the editor. This is precisely where and how norms derive 'their' power: from ideas of normality and processes of adherence to often tacit norms.

Referring back to Schein (2004: 12), norms can, in line with the example above, be understood as shared assumptions, in which case they derive power from the fact that they are taken for granted and get to operate outside awareness. They are as such non-questionable and affect organisational behaviour because an act based on any other premise than the norm is inconceivable due to the false naturalisation of the norm. From this point of view, norms not only affect organisational structures; they *are* structuring mechanisms of organisation. Norms are in that sense a form of culture control that normalises 'irrational' behaviour, the point being that what constitutes rational and irrational, respectively, is judged from a given norm(ative perspective). Certain values are deemed self-evident. It's like – paraphrasing Kunda (1992/2001: 353) – having a religion without knowing how you got it. As a religious or ideological belief is normalised, it gets to shape lived experiences of self, of one's identities, and, as a result, construct certain expectations to live up to (Fleming and Spicer, 2014). Norms, in other words, inform identity work (Alvesson and Willmott, 2002) based on the socially established truths about what is normal, meaning norms, from a managerial

perspective, have an identity regulatory potential. It is, however, a subtle form of power that, based on historical and cultural categories of difference and sameness, casts some (groups of) people into predefined roles that are noticed as being different, while others, the norm, may go under the radar as the (company) custom around which everyone else is deemed diverse.

Norm critique is an exposure of this kind of power in relation to a (post-structuralist) self that is contingent, fragmented and conditioned by context, e.g. one's perception of the expectations of significant others, with the organisation itself typically materialising as one such other (Muhr and Kirkegaard, 2013). The self and one's identity is therefore constantly negotiated relative to the surroundings, i.e. it is constructed by – repeating Cabantous et al. (2016) – norm-infested discourses. Norm critique, as also recently noted by Henriksson (2017), is a development in queer resistance that seeks to challenge institutionalised norms and hence existing power relations too. It originates, broadly speaking, from queer theory and related pedagogical practices but has, for instance in Sweden, spread and developed into a mode of governance for some of the public institutions that play a role in producing the societal norms which norm critique seeks to dismantle. Norm critique is therefore not only queer but also potentially performative, critically, in its attempt at denaturalising and hence repoliticising dominant norms as a contingent and contested terrain by means of explicating the norms. In doing so, norm critique may render visible 'apolitical' discourses of, for instance, 'merit' and 'inclusion' (e.g. Christensen and Muhr, forthcoming 2018) and address complicated issues of how and why people are treated differently in relation to the intersectional interplay of norms around gender, sexuality, ethnicity, etc. The performed critique is as such about making life harder and more challenging, rather than easier and more agreeable (Raffnsøe, 2017).

A critique beyond criticism

New normativities are not the end goal per se – at least not for the organisations presented in this paper. Being critical is not an end in itself either. Norm critique, as practised by the case organisations, is, I propose, about revitalising diversity work. As an example of this, Janssens and Zanoni (2014) argue that 'classical' diversity management reduces ethnic minority employees to representatives of a stigmatised social group by focusing on individuals' cognitive biases towards (out-)group members. The alternative approach suggested by the authors, on the other hand, juggles with a new normal that broadens the views on dominant norms and identities to redefine a new standard all employees alike are measured against, which to some extent counteracts – at the structural level – some inequality issues. I do not wish to suggest that norm critique somehow suspends normative judgement, but rather that the critical attitude, the unceasing disruptiveness,

involves an *ongoing* normative commitment that never settles. This form of critique – and the reason why I consistently write 'critique' rather than 'criticism' – is to suggest the virtuousness of critique as 'a practical ethical attitude that suspends obedience to authority and general rules (norms) to focus on the cultivation of judiciousness and excellence with regard to the conduct of already existing dispositions and the challenges they present' (Raffnsøe, 2017: 50). Understood this way, critique cannot be formulated as impartial and general criticism from outside; it can only be formulated as a relational critique (Staunæs, 2016).

In order to present a workable method of norm critique, the kind of critique that is performed is not irrelevant. I want to nurture what Staunæs (2016: 66-67) calls an affirmative critique, whose ambition is *not* to reflect 'reality'. Instead, the purpose of norm critique is to 'reconfigure the world', i.e. a practice of worldmaking in the sense that the critical aspect is about bringing to life co-existing organisational realities. Citing Taguchi, Staunæs (2016: 39) explains how affirmative critique is about 'performing a critical tracing of normative articulations and practices on a field of thinking, as well as an experimental mapping exercise that might help us narrate the reality in question differently'. Defined this way, the aim of norm critique is *not* to pass judgement in terms of good or bad, right or wrong, true or false. Rather, the purpose is to take queer postures to overcome dualistic ontological territories, showing contingency, without necessarily determining a specific direction.

Practising affirmative critique of organisational norms has, for my part, on several occasions prompted feelings of falling short as well as an urge to succumb to the expectations from participants to provide all the 'right' answers, 'quick fixes', 'best practices' and 'solutions' to 'their' problems, or what is problematised. However, norm critique is about, as Foucault would phrase it, not being governed quite so much (Butler, 2004). The critique can therefore *not* be formulated in disconnection of what it is critiquing, since it is always-already a critique of something. It should be understood as situated and relational, as it does *not* emerge out of nowhere; it comes from somewhere, this somewhere being given situations and the specific practices that the two case organisations are queering. The remainder of this paper provides the context of the study by presenting the two case organisations, whose norm-critical workshops are shown to affirm ephemeral moments of intersectionality. The empirical insights are, eventually, discussed in relation to the kind of affirmative norm critique that is performed to outline some of the possible implications of the suggested norm-critical method for research and practices of diversity management.

Methods and background to the study

The argument in this paper is built with inspiration from participant observations of the intervention methods of two organisations in particular: Sabaah and FIU-Ligestilling[1]. I will attend to each in turn. The case presentation should be seen as data in co-production (Ashcraft and Muhr, 2017: 18). By this I wish to imply an iterative process of coding as a practice that happened the moment I entered the field, that is to say, during the norm-critical workshops that comprise my data and not just after. Data collection and analysis are for the same reason not accounted for separately in their own subsections but will be elaborated on as I explain my engagement with the case organisations.

Sabaah (meaning new day/beginning in Arabic) is a non-profit interest organisation that seeks to improve the living and working conditions for LGBTQ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer) people with minority ethnic backgrounds in Denmark. The organisation of minority ethnic LGBTQ people creates a queer posture, which, according to Just et al. (2017), interconnects performativity and affectivity, thereby enabling queer matters to matter critically because they offer a potential for alternative organising of diversity. For a graphic example, consider how the mere existence of Sabaah, which was established in 2006, symbolises the possibility of being gay *and* Muslim (to perform the intersection of what might otherwise be perceived as two mutually exclusive positions) at the same time, thereby admitting their members to understand themselves from other subject positions than those permitted by the dichotomies of religion and sexual orientation alone. Also, note how 'minority' goes ahead of 'ethnicity', which can be considered a deliberate norm-critical choice. It is the minority position that is considered to be problematic and not people's ethnic backgrounds per se. It is not one's ethnic background but how one is minoritised with reference to ethnicity (or perceptions thereof) that is the focus of Sabaah's interventions.

I became affiliated with Sabaah in May 2016, when I signed up for their project 'Outreach', whose purpose is to prevent stigma and discrimination against people

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[1]   Besides the two case organisations presented in this paper, I have also followed the work of LGBT Denmark (observations of two pilot workshops). The organisation is developing an educational programme to ensure that Danish workplaces offer inclusive, equal and inspiring work environments for LGBT people. The project goes under the name 'Empatisk Arbejdsmarked' (in English: Empathetic Labour Market) and is, in ambition, similar to Stonewall's 'Diversity Champions'. Additionally, I would like to acknowledge Rikke Voergård-Olesen, whose work with promoting norm-critical practices in organisations I have followed ad hoc, resulting in inspiring conversations around the arguments of this paper.

with double minority status in relation (but not limited) to sexual orientation, gender identity and ethnicity by means of norm-critical workshop facilitation about rights, culture and norms. In addition to educational material, participatory observations and reflections from discussions and walk-throughs of exercises at the initial two-day crash course, I also draw on my own experiences of facilitating workshops as part of the Outreach project (12 participatory observations and counting). In doing research for this present study while performing the role of an educator in Sabaah, I could embrace a more collective approach to reflexivity (Gilmore and Kenny, 2015): bi-monthly all facilitators meet to share immediate thoughts with peers to get feedback. Hence, my engagement with Sabaah is not just an afterthought; it should be seen as ongoing.

Viewing my fieldwork as a relational endeavour, I expected it to be counterproductive for me to record workshops because one purpose of such a workshop was to establish a safe(r) space for identification and for learning. This would potentially have been undermined if everything the participants said was recorded and transcribed verbatim. I therefore opted for note-taking instead, which was left to immediate recall (e.g. McCormack and Anderson, 2010; McCormack, 2012) due to my active participation in facilitating the workshops I observed. Taking notes during the workshops was not an option, as this would most likely have disturbed the flow of the workshop, with potential detrimental effects to the learning space created. In spite of the obvious possibility of me having misrepresented recollections, this potential misgiving is minimised by the fact that we are always two facilitators 'in the field' and take time to evaluate together after each workshop. These evaluations are also archived in writing and used for the follow-up meetings every other month.

My analytical interest in the intersectional potential of norm critique was sparked when reading through the sheet with comments from my co-facilitators, who seemed to have made observations similar to my own. Many of them highlighted how in particular one exercise – which the analysis is structured around – apparently enabled workshop participants to discuss intersectional issues but with organisational and societal norms as points of reference. The ethnographic method of participatory observation is in this regard a deliberate choice on my part to avoid privileging the voices of my co-facilitators over those of the workshop participants. I agree with Yanow (2012) that the critical aspect of ethnography lies with its quality of being open to the multivoicedness of the research field (see also Staunæs and Søndergaard, 2008a). I wanted to experience the reactions of participants first-hand and in different settings, which is why I also immersed myself in the work of FIU-Ligestilling.

FIU-Ligestilling is a collaboration between three of the biggest Danish trade unions (3F, Dansk Metal and Serviceforbundet – all organising mainly skilled and unskilled workers) with the aim of promoting workplace equality. In 2017, they launched a three-year LGBT+ project (funded by LO – The Danish Confederation of Trade Unions) that aims at upgrading union and work environment representatives to tackle issues related to gender identities and sexual orientations from a norm-critical angle in order to prevent discriminatory work practices and ensure a more inclusive workplace. The data include six (and counting) participatory observations from FIU-Ligestilling. While Sabaah and FIU-Ligestilling have dissimilar target groups, their workshops are similar in their norm-critical and dialogue-based approach to teaching, whereby attendees are actively engaged through various exercises designed to foster critical reflections around dominant organisational norms and how some of these can be needlessly exclusionary to some people who do not 'fit' or perform the idealised norms. These exercises, relating back to Choo and Ferree (2010), are used to draw attention to the *unmarked* categories where power and privilege cluster by way of having everybody experience the underlying dynamics of sameness–difference (Ghorashi and Sabelis, 2013) and related processes of exclusion–inclusion. These ephemeral moments of experiencing one's relationship with the other guided my interest towards the argument for a norm-critical approach to organisational intersectionality.

Both of the above-mentioned projects had an outspoken focus on what could be labelled LGBTQ+ issues, e.g. the normative workplace expectation of sexual minorities coming out of the closet by actively disclosing (as opposed to passing) their sexual orientations. Yet, these issues were addressed primarily by rendering visible the norms that would animate such expectations, in this case a heteronormative work environment that keeps employees from seeing that, for instance, heterosexuals out themselves too. However, 'coming out' as heterosexual appears to be normal and therefore tends to go unnoticed and has different consequences (if any) in spite of being, in essence, the exact same action. Examples of heterosexual disclosures can, as also discussed during the workshops, be found everywhere – including at work, when colleagues talk about what they did with their families during the weekend, or when they bring their partner to work-related social gatherings, or when they have a picture of a spouse on their desk. Having norms as a common denominator also opened up an exploration of other and non-LGBTQ+-related issues, and how they relate intersectionally, as they became topical during the workshops. One example is situational ideals for what constitutes a 'good' employee or leader (e.g. Staunæs and Søndergaard, 2008a). Or, to give another example, emotional labour (e.g. Coupland et al., 2008): what feelings are welcomed and what are sanctioned and whether all employees have

equal access to display certain emotions regardless of their gender identity or sexuality.

Next, I will show how the norm-critical workshop spaces cared for such ephemeral moments of intersectionality by means of embracing productive confusion, or what we during the workshops proclaimed as 'loving provocations', to repetitively disturb existing normative paths of business-as-usual. This, in itself, involves a break with the performative/non-performative binary to open up the analytical playing field for a queer performativity that is critical by juxtaposing the poles; not to arrive at an alleged 'third' place, but to keep any such arrival in suspense, acknowledging the position of not knowing fully and instead encouraging curiosity towards what might come next – an ethics of hesitancy (Kofoed and Staunæs, 2015).

Two cases for norm-critical spaces

Having established a conceptual framework apt for showing how norm critique is, in its rejection of categorisation, always also potentially intersectional in its approach to organisational diversity, I will now illustrate this theoretical claim empirically by turning to the two case organisations: Sabaah and FIU-Ligestilling. My analytical emphasis is on what I call ephemeral moments of intersectionality. I carefully convey the intersectional experiences presented as ephemeral to underline how they are context-bound and for the same reason do not necessarily last over time. The following should therefore be judged not with generalisability in mind, but rather on the value the insights bring about in terms of substantiating and nuancing the theoretical and conceptual understanding of the intersectional potential of norm critique in its oscillations between visiblising categories and, at the same time, transgressing them. The relation between norm critique and intersectionality is therefore one where multiple and coexisting identities can be examined in their simultaneity by means of understanding the norms and not necessarily whether the identities comply with or are in opposition to the norms. To allow the workshop participants to reflect on norms and how they interact with identities, they were all invited to take part in an exercise, which was a versioning of a similar activity from IGLYO's (2015) norm-criticism toolkit[2].

Prior to the exercise, which I will get back to, we would as facilitators explain the LGBTQ+ acronym to the participants in order to have a common or shared

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2   IGLYO – The International Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer and Intersex Youth and Student Organisation is, according to their own website, the largest LGBTQI youth and student network in the world, with over 95 members in more than 40 countries.

language throughout the workshop. However, in line with Choo and Ferree's (2010) call for a design that will denaturalise power relations, focus is *not* on the minority groups of people but rather on the *unmarked* and privileged categories. In other words, a 'majority-inclusive' (Kofoed and Staunæs, 2015) design that also has the identified majority positions as object of inquiry. Instead of dwelling on LGBTQ+, thereby risking stigmatisation, sexualities and gender identities are explained with the norm – that is, cis-gender and heterosexuality – as a point of reference. Interestingly, the workshop participants tended to know all the 'labels' for the minorities (although they were not necessarily able to explain what the labels meant). In contrast to this, they tended not to have an equally developed vocabulary for the majority of people, the norm. What this initial phase of the workshop does, then, is to make the participants literate in discussing diversity issues in relation to norms, which allows the participants – particularly those who 'fit' a norm – to understand their own positions and those of others. I will illustrate this by giving a walk-through of the exercise designed with the intent to expose participants to the dynamics of diversity discourse in organisations, e.g. exclusion-inclusion mechanisms and the associated sameness-difference dilemma that can, as reported in Shore et al. (2011: 1266), lead to assimilation or differentiation.

All participants are asked to write down for themselves five identity markers that represent an attribute or aspect of their identity. They are told to select the identities based on how they see themselves and not how others might see them, in other words, how they self-identify. At times, we as workshop facilitators ask the participants if they think the self-chosen categories would be the same had they been tasked with categorising each other instead. While some participants are convinced that others see them as they see themselves, others believe that they are perceived differently. Regardless, they get to experience the privilege of being able to self-identify rather than having others' assumptions imposed on them.

A few participants are then invited to share their five identities voluntarily. At this stage, we also open up a discussion around the difficulty of finding and labelling your-self with the identity markers. What usually happens is that people who have experienced some kind of friction or tension or maybe even resistance against certain of their identities have little difficulty in finding and adding these identities to their list as important to how they understand themselves. In a network for minority ethnic women, they all easily shared how they see themselves as women and, for some, as feminists, then as mothers – working mothers with minority ethnic backgrounds and in-between two or more cultures. In another workshop a female participant shared how her being a mother becomes relevant in a work context. She mentioned the Danish expression 'raven mother', which is used to describe women who are perceived as neglecting their children and how she, in choosing to have a career alongside having children, sometimes felt labelled as a

raven mother by others, for instance when picking up her children from the nursery just before closing time. Interestingly, there is no equivalent expression in the Danish language for working fathers.

In stark contrast to the above-mentioned accounts is an example from another workshop where a participant in a middle-aged, white male (and assumed heterosexual) body proclaimed that the task was easy and that he only needed one identity marker to capture his person in full: his name. While this is the only time somebody simply mentioned their name, it seems symptomatic of how challenging it is for people who fit various norms – be these idealised forms of leadership or the colour of your skin, sexuality, etc. – to put themselves, categorically, into boxes. It is almost as if they have never been confronted with 'who they are'. It appears to substantiate what Staunæs and Søndergaard (2008b) highlight, namely that the categorical level becomes irrelevant and, as a result, is erased for people who perform and thus carry the norm. This is not to say that gender issues, ethnicity, age, etc. do not matter, quite the contrary, since 'irrelevant' in this case implies that fitting any given norm puts you in a privileged position where you remain unmarked (and unaware) and never get to reflect upon gender and other categories of difference. It is quite telling that those who find themselves in (a) position(s) where they, generally speaking, perform organisational norms frequently came up with identities such as 'the IT expert' or 'the funny guy' – what we could label as individual competencies and personality traits, which are often crowded out when you don't fit organisation-wide norms due to what Kanter (1977: 210) called the 'law of increasing returns'. Since, as individuals, minorities of a given demographic represent a smaller numerical proportion of the overall group, they each capture a larger share of the awareness given to that group. In breaking with a given norm, the attention received is based on perceived difference in relation to that particular norm, which brings us to the next phase of the exercise.

Having shared their five identities, the participants are asked to remove four of them. That is, they are to reduce their multiple identities to just one – the one they find most important in terms of describing who they are. Many participants find this part of the task difficult, and the process is perhaps best described as inflicting violence upon your-*self* because it is too reductionist, the participants complain, to talk about only one category when you just presented your-*selves* through five and possibly more categories – and still the list most likely was not fully exhaustive. The process itself of boiling down the many and different identities (which also tend to vary depending on context, e.g. work-self or 'private'-self, as well as on time, since many participants relate to how they have changed and have not been one coherent self throughout their life course) grants non-minoritised people with the experience of being associated with only one label – even though there was more

to them than, for instance, being a man. Moreover, being reduced to – and in the process made a representative of – one group also comes at the cost of being seen as a knowledgeable, capable and competent individual (Holck and Muhr, 2017), for instance as 'the IT expert' or 'the funny guy'. Majority norms force minority status to be recognised (for diverging from the norm) ahead of, for instance, professional background. Interestingly, following this exercise, some of the workshop participants who initially were of the opinion that it does not matter at work if you are LGBTQ+ or not suddenly expressed a realisation of why identifying as such can be imperative because of being cast as other.

Experiences of intersectionality surfaced particularly in those cases where the workshops had a large presence of minority groups. An example of this is the network in FIU-Ligestilling for minority ethnic women, where the organiser, who herself identifies as a woman with a minority ethnic background in Denmark, summarised her immediate experiences of the workshop as follows:

> The workshop inspired us to better understand some of the underlying mechanisms of discrimination that we, too, as minority ethnic women experience. We, among other things, learnt how to use the norm-critical glasses to become aware of discriminatory language and minority stress – a concept that ethnic minorities have been missing to describe the feeling of not being able to fully be yourself at work.

While the minority stress framework was introduced with reference to how the 'values' of sexual minorities are in a state of conflict with a dominant heteronormative (work) culture (Dispenza et al., 2016), the participants in the network translated this framework by linking it to their own positions not only as ethnic minorities or women, but also as women who are minority ethnic in a Danish workplace where being a person of colour (and your associated religious belief), not to mention wearing a head scarf, makes you stand out because you in one way or another break with the norms.

A concrete example of a situation that can lead to minority stress from not being able to 'fully be yourself at work' is when we in FIU-Ligestilling discuss recruitment and in particular job interviews and how the interviewer risks putting LGBTQ+ applicants in an unequal position if asking about 'the person behind the candidate'. The premise of such a question is a labour market that is better viewed as a 'personality market' (Hanlon, 2016: 15) where the employer is hiring a private as well as a professional self. Asking about family or leisure activities will, in that regard, potentially force a candidate with an LGBTQ+ background to speculate whether to pass or disclose their sexuality and/or gender identity and how a disclosure may affect the situation. That non-LGBTQ+ people don't have to deal with the same concerns became evident during the discussion when one of the participants – after having argued that sexuality is irrelevant in a work context –

suddenly realised that she actually discloses her own sexuality by listing her marital status and the name of her spouse (a man) in her CV.

Norms, in this way, become intertwined with power and privilege, because you can deny that a situation is problematic when it is not experienced as a problem to you personally. The interventions of Sabaah and FIU-Ligestilling are for the same reason not aimed at the individual but at the structural level – referring back to Rodriguez et al. (2016) – with emphasis on the norms of organisational practices. As in Janssens and Zanoni's (2014) study, the purpose is to rework and broaden dominant norms. The point is not that some norms are 'good' or 'bad' per se, but that they are material to people, whose manoeuvring capacity is affected by norms. The question is how some, or the same, people are privileged by certain organisational practices and work norms. Or, paraphrasing Staunæs and Søndergaard (2008b: 39-40), what types of people (subjectivities) specific norms produce, who is excluded in the process and how changes should be made accordingly. It is not the purpose of this paper to provide answers to these questions, but I will address them indirectly in the concluding discussion of possible implications of the suggested norm-critical method for research and practices of diversity management. I will, particularly, do so by addressing the kind of affirmative critique the norm-critical methods performs.

Concluding discussion

I have in this paper theorised norm critique as queer performativity through a cross-reading of recent academic debates about queer- and critical performativity theory. With inspiration from observations of norm-critical workshop facilitation in two case organisations I have moreover illustrated empirically how norm critique, in the move from investigation to a method for intervention, may create a space for what I have called ephemeral moments of intersectionality. I have argued that this state of ephemerality can render visible a multiplicity of emerging and intersecting categories of diversity while simultaneously overriding them, thereby acknowledging difference without fixing it as such. I have, in alignment with Pullen et al. (2016b), suggested that the queering/queerness inherent in the norm critical method performs a rejection of categorical and binary thinking and therefore has a potential for being performative, critically. In furthering the research agenda of a norm-critical way forward (Holck and Muhr, 2017) for studying organisational intersectionality I find it relevant to use the remaining paragraphs for discussing the kind of affirmative critique, which is performed. The discussion should, in spite of the subtitle of this section, not be read as conclusive, but as reflections that can be conducive to future norm-critical endeavours – whether for research or practice or both.

As already proposed, the kind of critique enacted when being norm-critical is one of affirmation, by which I, following the work of Raffnsøe (2017), want to convey a critique that emanates and unfolds from and is situated in the field that it assesses. It can be distinguished (although not separated entirely) from negative criticism (Bargetz, 2015), which is perhaps best explained with reference to Sedgwick's (2003) paranoid reading, whose mode of criticism would be to expose the truths of inequality regimes in organisational settings – as intersectionality studies has been successful at doing. But as Sedgwick (2003: 130) also mentions herself, 'paranoia knows some things well and others poorly', the point being, that there is a need for oscillating between paranoid and what she terms reparative readings. The latter is what I describe as affirmative critique. The norm-critical methods observed in this paper appear to be reparative, since they affirm tendencies already present in the learning spaces created and takes seriously the situation (of the people) that it critiques and whose practices it has as its ambition to intervene. It affirms existing dispositions and asks 'what if' by means of exploring what would happen if, for instance, a job interview were done in a slightly different fashion. Thus, the criteria for performing the critique are produced along the way.

To elaborate further on this affirmative quality to norm critique I would like to stay with the example from the analysis of a job interview situation and how existing practices may put LGBTQ+ candidates in disadvantaged positions relative to candidates that do not identify as LGBTQ+ due to heteronormative expectations and organisational preoccupation with hiring people that live interesting lives outside work. With the publication of this paper I have entered the second year of my collaboration with the two case-organisations. Hence, my role as a researcher is not simply to enter the field, criticise it at an assumed distance, and then to leave it. Rather, I assume responsibility for cultivating the power of the imaginary, for following and narrating different trajectories. By engaging myself in the workshop participants' everyday practices I can care for and nurture critical reflection of normative conditions and support incremental changes by means of broadening the norms. However, the purpose of the critique is *not* for me in my dual role as researcher and workshop facilitator to leave the participants with an assumed solution to how to tackle issues related to disclosure of a candidate's sexual orientation during an interview. Quite the contrary: the idea of the norm-critical method being affirmative is to connote its adventurous approach of meeting the participants where they are to explore, together, how to work with what they are already doing but in a different way.

The performativity of norm critique becomes dispersed and co-produced. In its second year the project in FIU-Ligestilling is, for example, supposed to broaden the norms for organising with the participants to avoid practices that stage disclosure of minorities' sexual orientations and/or gender identities. Since the

process of either coming out or remaining closeted can be seen as relational (e.g. Hoel et al., 2014) the way interviewers phrase questions and arrive at their own conclusions plays a non-trivial role in conditioning whether LGBTQ+ people can be open or not. Disclosure becomes a *re*action, as LGBTQ+ people have little agency in determining if and when they want to come out of (assumed) heterosexuality. However, the message from FIU-Ligestilling would be that practices for, in this case, job interviews can be changed to prevent the situation, e.g. by using gender-neutral words ('spouse' instead of 'wife' or 'husband') and pronouns. As such, the task ahead is – in the words of Fleming and Spicer (2003) – one of 'externalising' intersectionality issues to existing social and, in a work setting, organisational norms in order to undo organisational performativity (Riach et al., 2016) by means of subverting the normativity that conditions (managerial) practice and dominant relations in organisations. Having norms as a common denominator for the intervention has the potential of spreading this undoing to other issues of intersectionality, e.g. whether candidates in female bodies and/or of a non-white skin colour have to answer questions about, for instance, unpaid labour at home that do not apply to candidates in white, male bodies. This remains work-in-progress and new norms for organising are developed along the way. A concluding remark would therefore be that norm-critical reworking of organisational norms is a never-ending endeavour if it is to be queer, performatively, and avoid unreflexive replacement of one set of norms with another.

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