

# Spatially Embedded Inequality

## Exploring Structure, Agency, and Ethnic Minority Strategies to Navigate Organizational Opportunity Structures

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# Spatially Embedded Inequality: Exploring Structure, Agency, and Ethnic Minority Strategies to Navigate Organizational Opportunity Structures

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# **Spatially embedded inequality: Exploring structure, agency, and ethnic minority strategies to navigate organizational opportunity structures**

## **Abstract**

**Purpose** – This paper applies a spatial approach to organizational inequality to explore why unequal opportunity structures persist in an organization despite its commitment to diversity and employing highly skilled ethnic minority employees.

**Design/methodology/approach** – The (re)production of inequality is explored by linking research on organizational space with HRM diversity management. Data from an ethnographic study undertaken in a Danish municipal center illustrates how a substructure of inequality is spatially upheld alongside a formal diversity policy. Archer's distinction between structure and agency informs the analysis of how minority agency not only reproduces but also challenges organizational opportunity structures.

**Findings** – The analysis demonstrates how substructures of inequality stabilize in spatial routines enacted in an ethnic zoning of the workplace and ethnification of job categories. However, the same spatial structures allows for a variety of opposition and conciliation strategies among minority employees, even though the latter tend to prevail in a reproduction rather than a transformation of the organizational opportunity structures.

**Research limitations/implications** – The reliance on a single case study restricts the generalizability of the findings but highlights fruitful areas for future research.

**Practical implications** – The study sensitizes HRM practitioners to the situated quality of workplace diversity and to develop a broader scope of HRM practices to address the more subtle, spatially embedded forms of inequality.

**Originality/value** – Theoretical and empirical connections between research on organizational space and HRM diversity management have thus far not been systematically studied. This combination might advance knowledge on the persistence of micro-inequality even in organizations formally committed to diversity.

## **Keywords**

HRM diversity management practice, workplace diversity, organizational space and power, embodiment, ethnic minority strategies.

## **Paper type**

Research paper

## **Introduction**

Ethnic diversity in the Danish labor market is increasing. However, members of minorities are often employed in positions for which they are overqualified. As a result, they are overrepresented in low-skilled and provisional jobs, underrepresented in management positions, and more likely than members of the majority ethnic group to face unemployment (e.g. Ejrnæs, 2012, 2012; Ortlieb and Sieben, 2014; Siim, 2013). These macro trends tend to reflect the micro situation in organizations, even those organizations committed to diversity and equality, as unequal opportunity structures and the inequality that accompanies them often endure (Acker, 2006, 2012; Boogaard and Roggeband, 2009; Holvino and Kamp, 2009; Risberg and Søderberg, 2008; Tomlinson *et al.*, 2013).

Inequality and the precarious, marginalized position of ethnic-minority employees in organizations dominated by the ethnic majority's norms and values are dominant themes among both critical and more mainstream HRM diversity management scholars. The extant research is dominated by three perspectives. First, organizational inequality is often analyzed in relation to minorities' experiences with discrimination (e.g. Ahonen *et al.*, 2013; Ariss *et al.*, 2012; Klarsfeld *et al.*, 2012; Ostendorp and Steyaert, 2009; Oswick and Noon, 2014; Siebers, 2010; Van Laer and Janssens, 2011, 2014; Verbeek and Groeneveld, 2012). Alternatively, research in this vein centers on generalized societal discourses on immigration with a focus on deconstructing the different elements of those discourses (e.g. Bendick *et al.*, 2010; Boogaard and Roggeband, 2009; Holvino and Kamp, 2009; Muhr and Salem, 2013; Samaluk, 2014; Siim, 2013; Tomlinson and Schwabenland, 2010). Second, diversity research predominantly investigates the barriers that minority ethnic workers experience rather than the agency that they deploy (for exceptions see, e.g., Ariss *et al.*, 2012; Boogaard and Roggeband, 2009; Ghorashi and Ponzoni, 2014; Tatli and Özbilgin, 2012; Tomlinson *et al.*, 2013; Zanoni and Janssens, 2007). Third, the tenacity of unequal treatment in organizations is mainly addressed in socio-psychological terms as the effect of (majority) prejudice. This research suggests that it must be rectified through mainstream HRM practices, such as objective procedures, training, and mentoring/network activities (Ariss *et al.*, 2012; Dobbin *et al.*, 2011; Holck *et al.*, forthcoming; Janssens and Zanoni, 2014; Mamman *et al.*, 2012; Qin *et al.*, 2014; Williams and Mavin, 2014). This diversity research plays a vital role in documenting the persistence of status inequalities along ethnic (and gender) lines in the

workplace. However, this insistent focus on cognition in a socio-psychological perspective downplays the more subtle power relations embedded in the dynamics of organizational structure and employee agency, “leaving organizational structures and routines which reproduce inequalities and normalize the privileges of the dominant group (e.g. white and male employers) unchanged” (Janssens and Zanoni, 2014, p. 2).

To address the structural embeddedness of inequality and the role of minority agency, this study advocates a spatial approach to organizational inequality. The aim is to demonstrate how spatial structures both enable and constrain minority employee agency, as spatial routines simultaneously solidify in stabilized substructures of inequality *and* make way for minority employee agency of micro-emancipation. I rely on a spatial-structural approach to make three contributions to current research on HRM and diversity. First, I theoretically and empirically demonstrate how a spatial approach to workplace diversity might offer valuable insights into the more subtle workings of power, privilege, and disadvantage in relation to organizational substructures of inequality (Acker, 2012; Beyes and Steyaert, 2011; Clegg and Kornberger, 2006; Ropo *et al.*, 2013; Taylor and Spicer, 2007; Zhang and Spicer, 2014). Second, I analyze how the organizational space simultaneously constrains and enables minority agency of micro-emancipation (Alvesson and Willmott, 1992; Zanoni and Janssens, 2007). This also helps explain how organizational substructures of inequality solidify, as they are not only imposed on minorities – they are also actively reproduced and bolstered through minority employee agency. Third, I discuss how to develop a broader set of HRM practices to address the more subtle, spatially embedded forms of inequality. This adds to the diversity literature focused on crafting more emancipative ways of organizing workplace diversity (e.g. Ariss *et al.*, 2012; Ghorashi and Ponzoni, 2014; Ghorashi and Sabelis, 2013; Janssens and Zanoni, 2014; Mamman *et al.*, 2012).

Empirically, this spatial approach on organizational inequality draws on ethnographic fieldwork in “Agency” (an alias). Agency is a municipal center renowned for its diversity profile in the Danish context due to its ethnically diverse and specialized workforce, which serves locally operating international businesses. However, it is haunted by poor employee satisfaction, with almost 30 pct. of its employees reporting experiences of harassment and bullying from managers and coworkers associated with issues like language, color of skin, and ethnicity (Employee Satisfaction Report, September 2014). These experiences of harassment relate to the existence of an informal

parallel system that encompasses two prevalent routinized spatial practices: ethnic zoning of the workplace and ethnification of job categories. These routinized spatial practices run alongside – and partially undermine – the formal discourse on diversity and equality. Moreover, they constrain the free agency of minority employees. The minority employees spatially respond with five main strategies: a conciliatory strategy of embodying the stereotype that results in the reproduction of structural inequality; or opposition strategies of withdrawal, rebellion, passing, or deviance, all of which challenge the distribution of privilege and disadvantage in the organization.

In its exploration of a spatial approach to organizational inequality, this paper is structured as follows. First, the theoretical framework is introduced, in which research streams on diversity, organizational space, and embodiment are combined. Thereafter, Archer's analytical distinction between structure and agency is introduced to allow us to grasp the workings of substructures of inequality. Second, I present the methods used to trace the spatial dimensions of structure and agency, drawing on ethnographic fieldwork in agency. Third, I offer an analysis of the findings, identify the spatial routines that constrain minority agency, and show how they intersect with minority employee strategies of conciliation or opposition. Finally, I discuss ways of sensitizing HRM practitioners to the situated quality of workplace diversity with the goal of addressing the more subtle workings of organizational inequality.

### **Theoretical background**

The HR diversity management practices advanced in the scientific and management literature emphasize the importance of understanding and intervention for reducing or eliminating bias and discrimination in heterogeneous workplaces. This research is characterized by the noble intent for all organizational members to benefit from differences by maximizing inclusion, feelings of fairness, and equality (Bendick *et al.*, 2010; Holck *et al.*, forthcoming; Ortlieb and Sieben, 2014; Shore *et al.*, 2011; Tatli and Özbilgin, 2012). The field of diversity management is dominated by a social-psychological approach that stems from research on organizational behavior. This line of research assumes that negative in-group/out-group dynamics are the product of majority individuals' biased cognitive processes and stereotyping, which can be corrected and limited through formalized HRM practices (Janssens and Zanoni, 2014; Jonsen *et al.*, 2013; Mamman *et al.*, 2012; Qin *et al.*, 2014; Verbeek and Groeneveld, 2012; Williams

and Mavin, 2014). Within this tradition, HRM activities include three main types of practices. The first are *objective procedures* and pre-specified criteria for selection, promotion, and lay-off decisions; performance appraisals; and pay structures. Objective and neutral procedures are believed to restrict ethnic majority decision makers' discretion and prevent cognitive biases from shaping allocation and reward decisions (Kalev *et al.*, 2006; Shore *et al.*, 2011). The second practice is *training*, which aims to familiarize employees with anti-discrimination law, ensure behavioral changes, and increase cross-cultural awareness and communication (Dobbin *et al.*, 2011; Qin *et al.*, 2014). The third set of activities are *network and mentoring*, which are designed to counter the social isolation that minorities experience as a result of homogeneity (Janssens and Zanoni, 2014; Shore *et al.*, 2011).

However, according to critical diversity scholars, these widespread HRM practices of diversity management have generally proved insufficient. In fact, little empirical evidence supports their ability to foster workplace equality (Dobbin *et al.*, 2011; Holvino and Kamp, 2009; Janssens and Zanoni, 2014; Oswick and Noon, 2014). One line of critique is that HRM diversity practices are “premature” or based on trial-and-error processes rather than scientific knowledge. Another line of critique suggests that the inadequacy results from the targeting of cognition rather than the structural dimensions of privilege, domination, and disadvantage (Oswick and Noon, 2014; Zanoni *et al.*, 2010). These critics suggest that such practices might even backfire, resulting in stereotyping and re-marginalization (Kalev *et al.*, 2006).

This critique of the inability of HRM practices to mitigate workplace inequality leads to my problematization of how a focus on the individual, cognitive level fails to include consideration of the spatial-structural and relational aspects of workplace inequality. A spatial-structural assessment is often either completely overlooked or conceptualized as introductory or background information (Ahonen *et al.*, 2014; Ghorashi and Sabelis, 2013; Holvino and Kamp, 2009; Jonsen *et al.*, 2013; Klarsfeld *et al.*, 2012; Mamman *et al.*, 2012; Shore *et al.*, 2011; Tatli and Özbilgin, 2012; Zanoni *et al.*, 2010; Zanoni and Janssens, 2007). By introducing a spatial approach to workplace inequality, this study contributes to research broadening the scope of HRM practices and craft more emancipative ways of organizing workplace diversity. In addition, it adds to the small but growing number of HRM studies analyzing ethnic minority agency in relation to institutional and organizational barriers (Ariss *et al.*, 2012; Van Laer and Janssens, 2011,

2014). However, in contrast to other work, this study expands the research scope by exploring how minority employee agency paradoxically both challenges and reproduces organizational substructures of inequality.

### ***The enabling and constraining properties of the organizational space***

In this study, a spatial approach is used as an analytical lever to investigate the power dynamics involved in employees' spatial production and reproduction of substructures of inequality, which occur alongside the formal values of equal opportunity. This approach draws on the tradition of focusing on the relation between organizational space and power. In this tradition, the organizational space is viewed as a political area – a power-scape – in which the employees' spatial behaviors are implicated in the reproduction of power relations (Alvesson and Willmott, 1992; Clegg and Kornberger, 2006; Ropo *et al.*, 2013; Zhang and Spicer, 2014). This involves a productive view on organizational space as produced and reproduced in interactions involving both human and non-human elements (e.g. organizational artefacts, such as architectures, furniture, dress codes, techniques, and rules) that “constitute the experience of space through their forms of occupation, activity and movements as much as they are constituted through those spaces that enable and restrict certain events” (Clegg and Kornberger, 2006: 144). As emphasized by Clegg and Kornberger (2006), employees constitute the workspace through countless practices in their everyday work lives as much as they are constituted through them. This productive view on the workspace draws heavily on Giddens' (1984) view on structure and agency as mutually constituting – structures are produced and reproduced through agency, while they simultaneously enable and constrain agency. Thus, in this study, the constraining and enabling capacities of the workspace are directly linked to minority employees' agency and their degree of freedom to shape their own chosen career paths.

To be able to grasp how minority agency unfolds and navigates the organizational power-scape, I must analytically distinguish between the constraining/structuring capacities and (spatial) structures and their transformative/agentic capacities, as proposed by Archer (1982, 2003). Conversely, it is impossible to talk about the stringency of structural constraints versus degrees of personal freedom. Like Giddens (1984), Archer (1982) conceptualizes structure and agency as mutually constituting. However, Archer *analytically* grasps structure to pre-exist agency as a point of



analytical departure, and their interaction leads to either structural reproduction or structural transformation. In line with Archer, I first determine the constraining properties of the organizational space. This relates to the organization as a power-scape consisting of both formalized, explicit structures of equality (e.g. a formalized diversity policy) and more informal, tacit substructures of inequality, as coined by Acker (2012). Acker defines substructures of inequality as the often invisible processes in the ordinary life of organizations in which gendered (and ethnified) assumptions about masculinity/femininity (minority/majority) are embedded and reproduced, and inequality is perpetuated (Acker, 2012, p. 215). By zooming in on the informality of inequality substructures in conjunction with routinized spatial practices, I can uncover the tacit but routinized relational and behavioral aspects of workplace diversity. I refer to two categories of constraining properties of the workplace in the materialization of power and embodiment related to ethnification in job categories. With this spatial approach, I join Alvesson and Willmott (1992), who highlight how spatial practices “produce people” as stabilized constructions of power relations become embodied in and supported by organizational artefacts, such as rules and routines, thereby forcing employees to behave in certain ways.

Archer’s (1982) analytical distinction between structure and agency also creates an opportunity to trace minority employees’ spatial strategies of navigating the organizational power-scape, which lead to either structural reproduction or transformation. In a structure-agency perspective, minority employees are “knowledgeable agents” who are free to act but simultaneously restricted by their awareness and reflexive interpretation of the structural conditions, opportunities, and constraints they face (Ortlieb and Sieben, 2014). Minority employees are viewed not merely as passive receptacles of control but as agents who reflexively act in more or less compliant ways. These actions might create partial organizational spaces for their own micro-emancipation and, potentially, lead to more emancipative ways of organizing diversity (Ghorashi and Ponzoni, 2014; Janssen and Zanoni, 2014; Tatli and Özbilgin, 2012; Tomlinson and Schwabenland, 2010).

*Spatial constraints in the materialization of power and embodiment*

The first category of constraining properties of the workspace draws on organizational space as the *materialization of power relations*. This is widely cited as the disciplinary gaze of the panopticon, which induces (self-) surveillance, control, and discipline. This view was formulated by Foucault and propagated by critical poststructuralist scholars of power, politics, and control (Beyes and Steyart, 2011; Clegg and Kornberger, 2006; Ropo *et al.*, 2013). In this perspective, the workplace design embraces a certain effect of inducing routinized employee interaction, which materialize in stable relations of dominance (Taylor and Spicer, 2007; Zhang and Spicer, 2014). This spatial effect is furthered by the disciplinary gaze of peers and managers, who impose particular rules of engagement that, to varying degrees, are internalized or more or less cynically performed by employees (Nicholson and Carroll, 2013; Scott, 2010). Of interest in this regard is that employees pick up cues – often through non-cognitive senses of social cues and feelings of (dis)comfort and awkwardness – from the atmospheric quality, and from coworkers’ spatial behavior and their responses to others’ spatial behavior (Beyes and Steyart, 2011; Zhang and Spicer, 2014). These cues are then synthesized in spatial responses of what appear to be “natural” behaviors in the workspace, and solidify into spatial routines that guide future action and interaction.

The second category of constraining properties of the workspace is related to *embodiment and bodies at work* – elements that have traditionally been critical for feminist organizational theorists in their attempts to understand inequalities at work (Acker, 2006; Ashcraft, 2013). In addition, a recent issue of *Organization* (2015, Vol. 22 No. 2) demonstrates an increasing interest in theories that include the body and embodiment as part of the “ontological turn” within organizational studies stressing ethics in business (e.g. Dale and Latham, 2015; Kenny and Fotaki, 2015; Pullen and Rhodes, 2015). However, inspired by feminism and Foucault’s historical analysis of the “docile body” (Ropo *et al.*, 2013, Taylor and Spicer, 2007), I approach embodiment as an integral part of a spatial analysis. In the context of this study, the notion of embodiment refers to how “ethnified” bodies are viewed as naturally suited for performing certain jobs, so that those jobs are recognized not by their content and tasks but by *who* does them (e.g. “pink ghettos”, Ashcraft, 2013; Kenny and Fotaki, 2015). Thus, the organizational space offers templates for action and organizational roles through the configuration of human “equipment” (i.e. the employees), with its perceived skills and knowledge, and through job categories (Ropo *et al.*, 2013). The ethnification

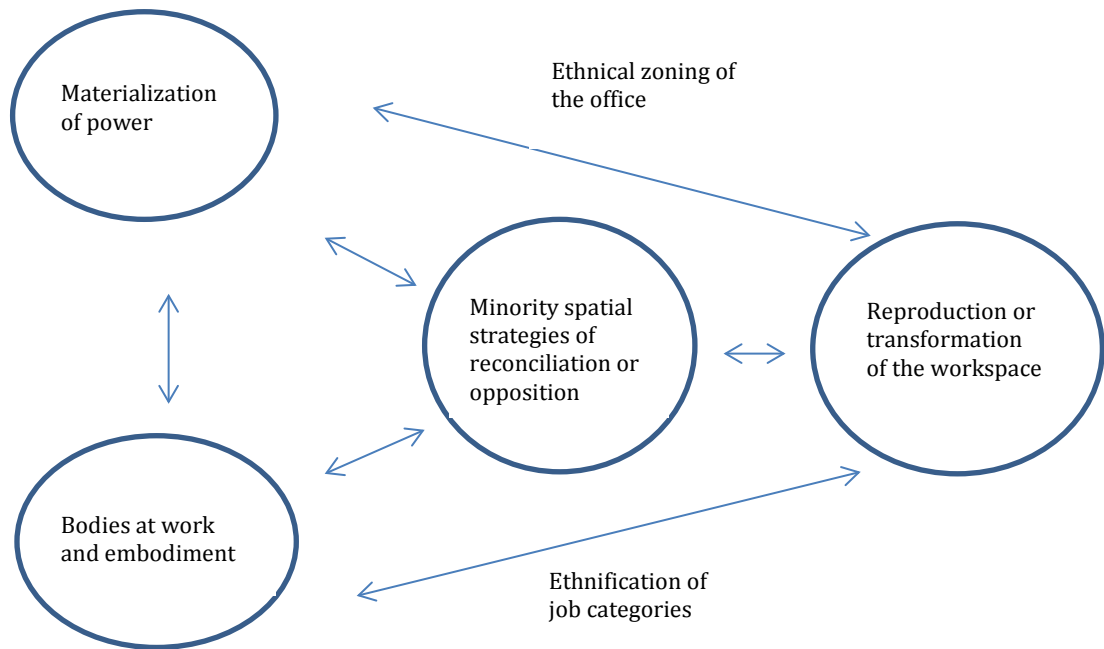
of job categories is often legitimized as a matter of meritocracy in combination with a need for adequate language skills and professional training. This is especially true among majority employees (Ortlieb and Sieben, 2014). Nonetheless, the organizational power-scape becomes embodied and materialized, such that it favors the upward mobility of members of the majority to the detriment of members of the minority.

*Minority employees' strategies: The enabling capacity of the workspace*

The enabling properties of the organizational space relate to minority employees' strategies of navigating the organizational opportunity structures. Power breeds resistance, and unequal power relations can always be bent, circumvented, strategically appropriated, and countered, thereby creating openings for micro-emancipatory projects (Alvesson and Willmott, 1992; Boogaard and Roggeband, 2009; Goffman, 1961; Ortlieb and Sieben, 2014; Tomlinson *et al.*, 2013). A spatial lens sensitizes the study to the minority employee's more covert acts of silent opposition and deviance, which supplement more overt and explicit resistance. It also allows for bodily acts of behaving differently or embodying other job categories than the (majority) norms prescribe. Therefore, the organizational space becomes a negotiated context in which minority spatial strategies sustain a certain interpretation of reality because minorities internalize the dominant rules and norms, employ methods of self-surveillance, and conform. At the same time, these strategies reinforce the very causes of inequality (Ahonen *et al.*, 2014; Dale and Latham, 2015; Pullen and Rhodes, 2015; Zhang and Spicer, 2014). Alternatively, minorities can engage in strategies that serve to create partial areas of resistance, but often at the cost of alienation and anxiety (Alvesson and Willmott, 1992; Goffman, 1961; Nicholson and Carroll, 2013; Scott, 2010; Zanoni and Janssens, 2007).

Figure 1 offers an outline of my spatial approach to the interplay between agency and structure.

Figure 1: Structure and agency in a spatial perspective



### Method, research site, and data analysis

To study spatial practices, the researcher must have a close relation to the setting. In practice, an ethnographic approach (Beyes and Steyaert, 2011; Zhang and Spicer, 2014) is required. Ethnography is defined by Van Maanen (2011) as the result of the ethnographer’s efforts to describe what he/she experiences in immersive, lengthy participant observations in the field. Furthermore, ethnography makes it possible to use several supplementary and experimental techniques, as the researcher can rely on what he or she sees, hears, and experiences in a specific social setting (see Van Maanen, 2011) while adhering to the situational pragmatism of the applied methods.

This study is based on ethnographic qualitative methods with a “participatory bent”, as the participants (i.e. organizational members) and the researcher as a type of participant affect the research process. Such research is meant to prompt members to reflect on the consequences of their actions (Ashcraft, 1999; Ghorashi and Ponzoni, 2014; Ghorashi and Sabelis, 2013). The “collaborative” character of participative research has a dual aim: to generate understanding, and to encourage the assessment and transformation of widely taken-for-granted modes of organizing in the focal organization (Beyes and Steyaert, 2011). The study therefore situated in an interpretative tradition that

acknowledges the constructed and relational nature of fieldwork and research (Nicholson and Carroll, 2013).

### *Research site*

“Agency” was a municipal center serving the locally operating international businesses together with the municipal administration to develop the municipal business strategy. It was founded in 2008 with eight employees, but it had grown to 85 employees by the time the fieldwork was initiated in May 2012. Its size had been halved by the end of the fieldwork period (summer 2014). The composition of employees was diverse in terms of age, ethnic background, gender, culture, educational background, previous work experience, and language skills. This was evident on the company's website, on which employees' cultures, knowledge, and language skills were explicitly described, thereby visually stressing the center's ambition to provide adequate service to international business. “Diversity” was not specifically mentioned on the organization's website or in official communication, but the organization referred to the municipality's diversity and equality policy of demographically mirroring the composition of its citizens. The formal structure entailed three units distinguished by function: advice giving and courses for entrepreneurs, registration and administration of licenses, and strategic/developmental work relating to the municipal business strategy. Agency had three middle managers (one female all with local background) and a CEO (male), and its offices were organized in a free-seating, open office manner for the formal purpose of encouraging cooperative practices and informal information sharing.

### *Data collection*

In order to trace the empirical data underpinning the spatial dimensions, I applied a combination of qualitative methods of contextualized ethnographic observation and interviews. My aim was to detect, comprehend, and interpret/decode the intersection between the organizational space and diversity processes. My lengthy stay in the organization and my participative fieldwork made this possible. While the fieldwork lasted for a total of 24 months, the bulk of the empirical data were collected over a nine-month period during which the researcher occupied an Agency desk twice each week for an average of six hours. Over the nine-month intensive period, three predominant

methods were applied: ethnographic observations, open-ended interviews, and interventions.

*Ethnographic observations* focused on the ways members routinely engaged with the workspace. This required closer studies of members' spatial practices, such as their appropriation of a desk in the morning, including their territorial demarcation of their space through the use of such elements as bags and writing utensils; their working routines, and the frequency of both professional and social meetings (with whom and how often). Together, these elements summed up to their routinized maneuvering of spatial artifacts and colleagues, which made up Agency's organizational space. Moreover participant observations were undertaken in multiple routine meetings, including center, department, team, and management meetings. In addition, I observed job interviews, two center workshops on "identity formulation" and "an attractive workplace", and ad-hoc social gatherings. Thick-description observations, based on my notes, were recorded each day in fieldwork diaries.

*Open-ended interviews* were guided by the initial participative observations. I undertook semi-structured interviews with 18 employees and managers, each of which lasted from 30 to 120 minutes. I asked participants to describe their perceptions of the working space in relation to the free-seating situation and the office design, the work culture, and the cooperative environment in terms of, for example, information sharing, task distribution, decision-making processes, and socializing. The interviews included visual elements, as members were asked to draw maps of their spatial routines and seating habits. A summary of the sample's demographics is presented in Table 1.

*Interventions* were utilized in the final months of intensive fieldwork. The members took an interest in the researcher as a "cognizant outsider", and some even used the study as grounds for action (Ashcraft, 1999). Interventions provided an opportunity to test the reliability of the data and the researchers' presumptions through presentations, seminars facilitated by the researcher, participation in debates, informal talks and reflections in response to members' requests, and one official written report.

*Table 1: Coding of interview with employees in 'Agency'*

<b>FUNCTION</b>	<b>CULTURE, TRAINING AND SEX</b>	<b>DATES</b>
Internal consultant Initially in a training position but in permanent position after six months	Spanish Human science Woman	Four interviews Nov 2012, June 2013, March 2014 and Sept 2014 Observation Job interview Dec 2012 Employee development interview with section manager March 2013
Section manager	Local background Political science Woman	Six interviews April 2013, 2 x May 2013, June 2013, July 2013, Feb 2014 Mail correspondence and skype interviews (two) Aug 2013 to Jan 2014
Consultant and political/strategic tasks (Union representative)	Local background Political Science Man	Two interviews Nov 2012 and April 2013
Chief consultant	Local background Master in Arts Man	Three interviews Nov 2013 (Skype), April 2014 and Oct 2014
Ethnic consultant In training position	Korea Business Diploma Woman	Observation Job interview Dec 2013 Interview Dec 2013
CEO	Local background Political Science Man	June 2013
Section manager	Local background Political Science Man	June 2013
Chief Consultant /political-strategic tasks	Local background Political Science Man	Nov 2013
Ethnic consultant	North African background Business Diploma Man	Jan 2014
Trainee position	Local background Accountant Woman	Nov 2013
Chief consultant/advisor	Local background Technical training Man	Dec 2013
Ethnic consultant	Former Yugoslavia Business Diploma Man	Dec 2013
Consultant/ political-strategic tasks (union representative)	2. generation Humane science Woman	Nov 2013
Consultant/advisor	Local background Graphic designer Man	Dec 2013
Chief consultant / political-strategic tasks	Local background Social Science Woman	Dec 2013
Ethnic consultant	India Formerly self-employed Woman	Dec 2013
Chief Consultant/political-strategic tasks	Local background Political science Woman	Dec 2013
Project position	2 generation Political Science Man	Feb 2013

### *Data analysis*

Transcription and initial data analysis began shortly after the study started (Silverman, 2010). To analyze participative observations, interviews, and interventions, I applied a qualitative content analysis inspired by narrative analysis (Lieblich *et al.*, 1998). The content analysis was carried out by splitting the data into relatively small units of content on the basis of themes. Initially, I began by scanning the data and isolating the words and phrases connected to majority/minority distinctions in relation to “spatial zoning”, “embodiment of job categories”, and “minority employee spatial strategies” with a particular focus on strategies of conciliation and opposition. After assigning open codes to different sections of the data, the first descriptive coding revealed common patterns and themes relating to the spatial analytical categories.

In the second round of coding, I paid particular attention to producing adequate themes. In this regard, I assigned content to three spatial analytical categories. First, in relation to the “materialization of power”, the emerging themes were power relations enacted in the spatial routines of zoning of the office space. These emerged from my own observations and employees’ maps of spatial routines, seating habits, and employee reflections on those maps. Second, in relation to “bodies and embodiment”, I traced employee perceptions and behavior that suggested the existence of an informal system of task distribution, advancement, and cooperative patterns, all of which gave rise to a system of majority and minority job categories. The third category – minority spatial strategies – rested on minority employees’ accounts of their own and colleagues’ attempts to navigate the organizational opportunity structures. In particular, one case of experimenting with a different task distribution in cooperation with a middle manager and the subsequent “cost of emancipation” was influential for my findings. In the analysis, I was particularly observant of not only what employees said they did, but also of actual patterns of action and interaction. My aim was to understand how the organization as a power-scape was kept in place and challenged by the myriad of employee practices, many of which ran parallel to the formal structures of rules and communicated values.

### **Findings**

In this section I present the findings regarding the enabling and constraining abilities of spatial structures, their intersection with the power-related distribution of privilege and



disadvantage, and minority employees' strategies of conciliation or opposition in Agency. The first analysis explores how routinized spatial practices created durable substructures of inequality in Agency despite a formal commitment to diversity and equal opportunities. The second analysis investigates how the organizational space granted minority employees certain liberties to embark on strategies of opposition or conciliation.

### ***Spatial constraints in the materialization of power and embodiment***

#### *Materialization of power*

Agency was situated in a large municipal building. The office space was open, and it was furnished with funky, low-price design furniture in bright colors. The furnishings invoked a creative and modern impression that was not too flashy. With the exception of a central kitchen and a small two-person secluded office for writing, Agency's physical layout was dominated by a transparent style, which signaled openness. It was predominantly made up of a shared working zone in which tables were lined up in rows along two parallel window sections. A maximum of eight people could work at each table. The Aisles were found at one end of the tables. Eight glass-walled meeting rooms were located at the ends of the shared office space, each offering either comfortable chairs or more formal meeting tables. These offices, and together with a seating area in the center of the office, were intended to support frequent meeting activities.

Agency had an official free-seating policy, which was formally articulated by managers. The aims of the policy were to invoke voluntary, informal information sharing and rotating cooperation patterns to activate the employees' diverse skills and knowledge, and to ensure an inclusive climate. However, when asked, employees were able to draw maps of the informal zoning of the office and to place most of their colleagues in fixed seats. In these maps, the administrative staff typically occupied a zone at one end of the office, while the consultants were typically located at the other end of the office. The international group occupied a third zone located between the other two, where members took advantage of the opportunity to take collective breaks and speak together in Spanish. The international group also inhabited the small secluded office within the larger office, which was officially reserved for telephone calls and writing. They referred to this office as "the cage". As one interviewee stated, "We are very much subdivided into groups due to the way we sit. I often sit in the cage with Naya". When

asked whether the cage was reserved for those who make trouble, this interviewee stated, “Ha ha. Yes, you might say so.” Most respondents emphasized that they were seated in groups according to ethnic background: “We are very mixed *and* very segregated. Just watch how people sit together. Those with similar ethnic backgrounds speak together and socialize. We are even divided according to whether we are first or second generation”. Another interview mused, “We are divided between the ‘real’ Danes and the foreigners. Only a few manage to navigate between the two groups. It is a rather poisonous environment”.

The relatively fixed groupings of employees according to ethnic background were evident in the physical zoning of the open office space, in the patterns of who spoke to or smoked cigarettes with whom, in the lunch patterns, and in the languages used around the office. The groups also displayed different behavioral norms. The loudness of collective breaks in the international group provided a direct contrast with the relative silence of the shared workplace. This was often met with resentment: “They just look at us when we talk in Spanish. Often we hear jokes like: ‘Do you dare tell them that they speak rubbish?’”. Employees’ spatial practices clearly signaled patterns of inclusion and exclusion but also indicated who were able to break the unwritten rules of behavior.

Agency’s organizational workspace was a contested space encompassing an ethnified hierarchy despite of its equivocality: the contrast between the signal of openness (i.e. free seating) and the visible spatial enactment (i.e. segregation and ethnic zoning). Accordingly, where an employee placed his or her body represented a political act that demonstrated whether that employee was privileged with a “permanent” seat that no one would (dare to) take or a provisionary employee in a low position who had to fight for a work space every day. The seating choices also reflected the ethnic groups with which employees identified. The power-scape became very visible in these daily seating dramas.

Contrary to the official intention, the free-seating hampered social interaction and served as a type of collective shaming. Employees were very careful with regard to the kinds of signals they sent through their spatial behavior, and they paid close attention to the signals sent by their colleagues. This resulted in less frequent interaction due to fear of interrupting or annoying colleagues, which had a notable negative effect on the inclusion of newcomers with an international background. Newcomers talked about feeling lost and forgotten in the office space, and stated that they never know where to sit. They also

highlighted a fear of occupying a “taken” seat and thus breaking unwritten office rules. Navigating the free-seating office space was described as one of the biggest on-boarding challenges. Apart from this frustration, the dysfunctional free seating highlighted an inclusion problem. As such, this problem became a legitimate theme, under which lied the theme of a lack of coherence and cross-ethnic cooperation, which in turn perpetuated a substructure of inequality.

### *Bodies at work and embodiment*

The ethnic zoning of the workplace was closely related to another spatial practice that reinforced a substructure of inequality. One particular spatial artefact – the employee body with its salient demographic features – was used to stabilize power relations. In line with Ashcraft’s (2013) metaphor of “the glass slipper”, this dimension captured how job categories in Agency “naturally” possessed features that fitted certain groups of employees but not others, resulting in the “ethnification” of job categories.

In Agency, there were no formal rules or procedures for task distribution. Rather, tasks were distributed at the discretion of the managers, allegedly according to who was most qualified to perform the task. In addition, promotions were decided by the CEO on the basis of meritocratic principles outlined in the municipal policy. However, informally, two job categories existed: high prestige political/strategic jobs and low-prestige representative/practical advice-giving jobs. Even though the very idea behind the organization was to help practitioners and political strategists work together to generate innovative political-strategic proposals, there was a sharp functional distinction between members performing the political/strategic work, which predominantly consisted of writing tasks and attending political meetings, and the more representational, customer-oriented functions of consultancy and advice giving. The customer-oriented tasks were officially praised as the center’s backbone. However, they were unofficially perceived as low-status tasks intended to showcase the “diversity” of the employees and their language competences. One minority employee reflected on the fact that he was pictured on Agency’s main web page but not considered “qualified” to represent the organization at municipal meetings: “We are good enough when we can be used for promotion and to look politically correct. However, when it comes to doing the exciting jobs, we are left out”.

Most employees described the political-strategic work as high status and as the access point for advancement in the municipal hierarchy. Political-strategic assignments were often referred to at center meetings as victories in which Agency contributed to the city-wide business strategy. Members working with political/strategic tasks often received task assignments directly from the CEO and were asked to join him at strategically important meetings. The CEO officially praised the representativeness and the international dimension of the employees. However, employees with the “right” professional training (in political science), and native Danish speaking and writing skills were selected for almost all of the high-prestige tasks. Therefore, entrance into high-prestige tasks and professional career tracks was guided by a process aimed at filtering out those employees who were “adequately skilled” to perform certain tasks, as articulated by the CEO:

In order to be able to mirror the municipal corporate landscape, it is important that we have language skills and ballast from other cultures. For example, if we deal with a greengrocer who speaks Arabic, then it is fine to bring Jamal. However, everything that goes up the political system is in Danish, and it is probably just easier for ethnic Danes because they fit, they know how to frame it, and the language is natural in another way. It is a matter of trust throughout the system.

Even though the CEO described the issue as a matter of legitimacy and the practice as one that benefitted all concerned, the end result was that employees with international backgrounds found themselves in the representative, low-prestige job category. At a managerial meeting, the CEO even encouraged the other section managers to be “more tedious ... we must avoid signaling that we have many different backgrounds and we are ‘strange’. Instead we have to signal that we are efficient and knowledgeable”. From his perspective, difference was the same as non-professionalism, while the “tediousness” of white employees trained in political science was equated with professionalism.

Most of the respondents – both employees and managers – spoke of ethnicity as a “skill” in itself. The official recruitment strategy embraced this view, as the talent pool from which Agency drew on was very diverse: “When we recruit employees for advisory tasks, we need ethnic diversity to, for example, service the pizzeria owners”. However, most of the employees with international background entered Agency through an active labor-market scheme, which aimed to move the unemployed into provisional, publicly funded positions. In other words, diversity was coupled with corporate social

responsibility and newly appointed “diverse” employees were assigned a lower status, at least initially. Moreover, they had to fight to obtain a permanent position.

### *Minority employees’ strategies of navigating opportunity structures*

This analysis examines how minority agents in Agency both mobilized and reinforced the constraints of the organizational space. Of key concern is how minority employees spatially navigated the power-scape while trying to manipulate events and material resources in order to turn them into opportunities, which in turn may have the potential to transform the organizational opportunity structure. Like bricoleurs, employees creatively applied five main strategies according to the situational logic, and they even vacillated among the strategies.

#### *Conciliatory strategy: embodying the stereotype*

The most prevalent minority employee strategy was linked to bodies at work and embodiment, and implied what Goffman terms “colonization” (1961) – accepting and cynically demonstrating compliance. By playing the game and embodying the stereotype of doing representative work, conflicts were temporarily kept at bay. This strategy was closely related to Alvesson and Willmott’s (1992) warning about the costs of emancipation in the form of anxiety and alienation. Hence, embodiment of the stereotype created a secure position and stability in work life, but it was accompanied by low self-esteem and a relentless need to justify the situation as organizational unfairness. This strategy was evident in the employees’ compliance with ethnically zoned seating, collaboration, and socialization patterns. Feelings of social injustice strengthened the bonds among peers with minority backgrounds, while expanding feelings of alienation from majority colleagues.

However, the ethnified job categories could be turned into a strategic position of indispensability. In other words, ethnic-minority employees could exclude others by stressing the valuable language and cultural skills they possessed. Paradoxically, this kept minority employees from challenging the basic cause of inequality – the stereotypical distinction between majority and minority employees in terms of skills and competencies. In fact, they reinforced this stereotypical view in order to preserve their own power (Boogaard and Roggeband, 2009). This touches upon how the constraint exercised by any structure over one person is directly related to the opportunity it offers

to another, which leads to an inherent paradox of inequality and opportunity along ethnically defined lines (Ortlieb and Sieben, 2014). The activation of the minority/majority distinction granted access to advantages and disadvantages in Agency. However, taking advantage of reserved, ethnified job categories concomitantly reproduced the very structures that perpetuated marginalization.

#### *Opposition strategies of withdrawal, rebellion, passing, and deviation*

The most prevalent opposition strategy was passive resistance in which the employee avoided the managerial and collegial gaze through *withdrawal* (Goffman, 1961; Scott, 2010), linked to the materialization of power. Agency's free-seating setup resembled a panopticon in which surveillance and self-surveillance were parts of its members' interactions. However, Agency also offered numerous hideaways in which members were free from direct scrutiny. These could be found in online social media, in the smoking area outside, in visits to external clients, and in working at home. Another strategy of withdrawal was to take collective breaks during which languages other than Danish were spoken. This created a space free of majority dominance, while it consolidated the language-based social and collaborative groups. The numerous reports of stress and long-term sick leave pointed to yet another withdrawal strategy.

A second, more active opposition strategy was *rebellion* (Goffman, 1961; Scott, 2010). Rebels emphasized social-demographic categories with political ends. In systems built on the privileges and rights of certain fixed identities, the uncovering of privilege can be converted into political activities, thereby creating internal group solidarity as a point of departure for mobilizing transformational pressure (Holck *et al.*, forthcoming). The rebel in Agency was motivated to fight for justice on behalf of others and often held an employee representative function in the collaborative structure. In that position, the employee would seize every opportunity to unmask unfairness in the distribution of tasks assignments for others, while maintaining his or her privileged situation as an exception to the rule. This created a strong power base for an employee known by peers for speaking the truth and viewed as untouchable by management, as the Janus face of the rebel was the martyr.

The minority strategies of withdrawal and rebellion both took place within a hierarchy in which minority employees were placed in representative roles at the bottom and white majority employees trained in political science were at the top. This power-scape was

reified through routinized expectations of behavior and biased interpretations of events – by the winners and losers in the spatial order.

Among the more troublesome opposition strategies actively challenging the status quo of distribution of privilege and disadvantage, was *passing* (Goffman, 1961; Nicholson and Carroll, 2013). Employees trying to “pass” as members of the majority group were marked by their peers as traitors or deniers of their background: “You know Sarah? She pretends she is not a foreigner. She once asked me if Lebanese people can eat licorice, but she is a Muslim herself!” Hence, the strategy of “passing” was difficult for colleagues to tackle because it obstructed the rebel’s political struggle for social justice, invalidated the claims of unfairness made by the stereotype, and impeded the naturalized matrix of task and status distribution introduced by the privileged employees. Accordingly, few members were allowed to adopt a passing strategy with the status “second generation immigrant” as a necessity.

The most problematic of the minority strategies was *deviance*, which aimed to create partial spaces of micro-emancipation (Scott, 2010). The deviant insisted on moving beyond patterns of inequality, and vowed to stick to his or her own chosen career path. For example, Isaac, an employee with international background persuaded a section manager that he should be assigned political-strategic tasks. This assignment was made unofficially and “at his own risk”. As no formal system of task distribution and job categories was in place, this was just a matter of distributing tasks differently than prescribed by the managerial discretionary routine. Accordingly, the Isaac was left to his own devices while trying to prove that a foreigner who had not studied political science could perform political/strategic tasks. The responses from colleagues were immediate: “The first thing [a section manager] asked me last Friday was ‘Why did you get these assignments on business policy? Why are you allowed to do this with your background?’. Thereafter, Isaac experienced an increase in professional and social isolation:

It has become very unpleasant to be here, and I get back-stabbed every now and then ... people are constantly questioning whether “we” – the non-Danes – have the right competences, especially writing skills. I constantly have to prove that I am good enough.

Remarkably, Isaac’s exclusion was reinforced by peers with minority backgrounds. Especially among the rebels and the stereotypes, Isaac was viewed as impersonating the “stranger among us” and as a threat to the spatial organizational ordering of “us versus them”. Isaac embodied an equivocal Other who both unmasked the artificial character of the minority/majority distinction on which claims of social injustice were based, and demonstrated its pervasiveness by demonstrating very tangible barriers to equal opportunity. Isaac ended up being excluded and unofficially exiled from Agency: “Troublemakers like me get ‘engaged’, or lent out to other organizations, so that we are kept out of sight”. The materialization of power relations subsequently solidified, demonstrating the mutual constitution of estrangement and solidarity (Scott, 2010).

Table 2 provides an overview of the findings in relation to the spatial themes of materialization of power and embodiment, and minority employees’ strategies.

*Table 2: Overview of spatial themes and practices in Agency*

<b>Enabling and constraining capacity of space</b>	<b>Themes</b>	<b>Spatial practices</b>
Materialization of power	Ethnical segregation of the office space	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Ethnical zoning and fixed seating in a ‘free seating’ office</li> <li>- Segregated patterns of socializing and cooperation</li> <li>- The office space as a power-scape reinforced by symbolic employee spatial practices related to seating and socializing routines</li> </ul>
Bodies at work and embodiment	‘Ethnification’ of job categories	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- High-prestigious job categories are reserved for ethnic majority employees legitimized by meritocracy</li> <li>- Low-prestige job categories are reserved for ethnic minorities hampering their own choice of career paths</li> </ul>
Minority employee spatial strategies	Strategies of conciliation and opposition	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Embodying the stereotype</li> <li>- withdrawal from the gaze</li> <li>- passing</li> <li>- rebellion</li> <li>- counter-space of deviance</li> </ul>

### **Concluding discussion, implications for HRM practices, and limitations**

This study adds to the emerging field of critical diversity research by moving diversity debates away from their foundation in cognition and social psychology (Ariss *et al.*, 2012; Qin *et al.*, 2014; Williams and Mavin, 2014; Zanoni *et al.*, 2010). This article has explored the enabling and constraining capacities of Agency’s organizational space in relation to minority employees’ abilities to shape their own chosen career paths. The study demonstrates how spatial practices can detract from, distort, or even hijack formal policies on equal opportunity by spatially re-inscribing a majority/minority distinction.



In Agency, the zoning of the office space along ethnic lines and the ethnification of the job hierarchy resulted in the assignment of certain job categories to either minority or majority groups.

This spatial approach to organizational substructures of inequality informs current research on HRM diversity management in two ways. First, I argue that formal HRM practices – such as objective procedures, sensitivity training, and networking – often fail because they are not embedded in a situational assessment of the tacit, organizational “underbelly” of power battles related to privileges, disadvantages, and resistance. For instance, Agency relied on objective criteria in recruitment and selection – a common HRM practice. As a result, minority applicants were recruited, but only for limited number of job categories, and predominantly on a provisional basis with little potential for advancement. Hence, the diversity potential was undermined by spatial practices that produced ethnic stratification in relation to cooperation, socializing, and task-distribution routines. In addition, to be able to benefit from training and network activities, a general recognition of the existence of substructures of inequality is necessary. In Agency majority employees had the privilege not to see their privilege (Acker, 2006) persuaded by objective and neutral criteria of municipal meritocracy backed by formal diversity policies of equal opportunities. In this situation sensitivity training and networking/mentoring might even have led to re-marginalization and stereotyping, triggering negative (majority) responses in which promoted minority members were perceived as non-deserving (Kalev *et al.*, 2006).

Second, a focus on the barriers experienced by minorities, rather than the reflexive agency they deploy, cuts HRM diversity management practitioners off from an important vehicle of transformation. To facilitate change, HRM practices must provide disadvantaged minority employees with material and symbolic resources in order to empower them to fight against their marginalization (Boogaard and Roggeband, 2009). In this regard, objective criteria, networking and mentoring are insufficient. Empowerment must include a broader set of structure-targeting HRM practices involving minority employee participation and empowerment, and a break with ethnic zoning and the ethnification of job categories. In Agency these could have included compulsory rotations in teamwork, conflict-resolution processes, access to crucial information and resources, involvement in high-prestige mainstream tasks, and

providing some influence on decision-making processes (Janssens and Zanoni, 2014; Qin *et al.*, 2014; Van Laer and Janssens, 2011, 2014).

The adoption of a spatial approach to workplace inequality also has significant implications for practice, as the empowerment of minority employees requires careful consideration of the advantages and costs of strategies related to either conciliation or opposition. Consequently, a complex and paradoxical configuration of the motivations behind minority employees' strategies in Agency emerges. On the one hand, they worked within an organizational structure that reflected and sustained majority-enforced norms. On the other hand, they benefitted from their favorable positioning, which arose from their specific skills for dealing with international customers and representing the company. This paradoxical position may explain why conciliatory strategies tended to prevail despite the broader variety of opposition strategies and the high level of minority dissatisfaction. Notably, employees from both the ethnic majority and the ethnic minorities gained from this paradoxical minority position of privilege/disadvantage, which in turn perpetuated a substructure of inequality.

This serves to highlight the rarity of structural transformation – once minority employees have learned to play the game, the losses associated with deviations are high and the desire for reform declines (Ortlieb and Sieben, 2014; Tomlinson *et al.*, 2013). The stakes must be shifted increasing the advantages of opposition, especially in relation to the strategy of deviation, which posed the greatest challenge to the skewed opportunity structures in Agency. The costs of micro-emancipation were too high in terms of alienation and anxiety for minority employees (Alvesson and Willmott, 1992). An alternative organizational space must to be crafted in which all employees' contributions are valued equally. This necessitates a broader definition of the competencies that constitute a qualified employee regardless of ethnic affiliation (Ghorashi and Ponzoni, 2014; Ghorashi and Sabelis, 2013; Janssens and Zanoni, 2014).

This study suffers from several limitations but highlights potential areas for future research. First, there are limitations associated with focusing on a single case, as the findings cannot be generalized to the total population but can only demonstrate the power of the example (Silverman, 2001). Second, focus is on a particular type of (flat and post-bureaucratic) organization in a specific cultural context (Danish). However, as there are other modes of organizing in other cultural contexts, more work is needed to

explore the various types of spatially embedded substructures of inequality and the related configuration of minority employees' strategies.

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