

What is social inequality in sociology

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All that a good government aims at, is to add no social constructs to the force of its own unavoidable consequences, and to abstain from strengthening social inequality as a means of increasing political inequalities. With that said, in this paper I will briefly address the race, class, gender debate with greater emphasis on diversity and social development policies taken up by post apartheid South Africa to redress inequality. It is imperative that we define key concepts in order to fully grasp the notion of this paper.

Firstly inequality is defined as the unequal distribution of power, wealth, income and social status. But what creates structural inequalities in societies? Race, class and gender! Hence the term “ social inequality”, it refers to the ways in which socially-defined categories of persons (according to characteristics such as gender, age, ‘ class’ and ethnicity) are differentially positioned with regard to access to a variety of social ‘ goods’, such as the labour market and other sources of income, the education and healthcare systems, and forms of political representation and participation (Web 1).

Creating inclusive organisations that welcome diversity and meet needs of different social groups is termed as diversity management (Beall 1997: 3). Social development policies refer to the social relations necessary for human wellbeing and the systems by which wellbeing may be promoted. Social inequality as mentioned above was created through power struggles on which colonialism, apartheid and segregation were based (Terreblanche 2002: 26).

We live in a country where our worth has been minimized to a social construct , where individuals identities are shaped by these factors which

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decide if one is a “ have or have-not” and are denied the same level of access to rewards and resources as other groups. As a result many participants in the workplace experienced discrimination. Discrimination in the workplace is based on the “ so called differences” of workers in an organisation relating to the “ evil triplets (race, class and gender) of South Africa as described by Cebekhulu in (Simon, Madimeng & Khan 2011: 31).

Discrimination is largely influenced by the power of one class over the other in the context of South Africa we are talking about the capitalists over the working class. In South Africa exclusion has gone beyond inter racial inequalities and now it is intra racial (within one race group) hence the development of black elites created by Black Economic Empowerment (which we will discuss in the latter part of this paper) and the poor black.

This gap between the haves and the have-nots originates from the apartheid regime due to the impact of institutionalized discrimination which saw the advent of extraction of cheap labour therefore leading to the exclusion of majority of South Africa to fall under “ elite class”. However companies have adopted diversity management to try mending the cracks between individuals in an organisation. Firstly what is diversity? According to Beall it is variation and modification according to wealth, race and gender issues, education and occupational level (1997: 9).

We understand that our differences create conflict amidst social identities therefore the need for diversity management is crucial. Diversity management assists members of an organization to embrace the fact that we are not the same therefore differences in opinions and views may arise (Web 2) therefore members are encouraged to be tolerant and

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accepting of others and their ways of doing things because it brings a variety of “ ingredients”(interests, values, physical and emotional characteristics to the “ pot” (workplace).

The crux of this paper is on the social development policies which are concerned with meeting the needs of individuals by redistributing resources to the most needy, however we find that by targeting a certain “ deserving group” further creates more problems. Why is this so? Because the people that are said to be needy are socially constructed, we tend to decide who needs what based on their current state which therefore attaches a stigma or a label to that person.

When we label and categorize people according to identities they assert we fail to recognise their full potential (Beall 1997: 10). For example a disabled person can come to be seen as disabled as compared to others which clouds ones vision of that person’s strengths, weaknesses and qualifications and therefore we tend to undermine their capabilities. The act of targeting “ a specific group” further perpetuates status and class which was discussed above in the race class debate, further widening the gap between the haves and the have-nots.

As mentioned above that an effective diversity management program will promote recognition and respect for the individual differences found among a group of employees, we must note that organisations face numerous problems associated with managing diversity and culture therefore it is of utmost importance that when policy making and management takes place it should collaborate with diversity (Beall 1997: 10). Hence why he states that diversity management requires employment equity in its implementation.

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The Employment Equity Act (EEA) no. 55 of 1998 was set in place to redress inequality in South Africa which was created by discriminatory laws and related practices of the apartheid regime, its aim was to ensure no individuals were denied employment opportunities for reasons unrelated to ability. (Butterworth, 2001: 11). Its great focus was on developing the previously marginalised which also included women.

In a report on Pretoria news by the South African Reserve governor, Marcus (2011), statistics show that South African women make up 52 percent of the total population according to Statistics South Africa (Website 3) and contribute 41 percent of a total national labour force but hold 19.3 percent of top senior positions in management as relatively compared to their other countries, in Australia 8 percent, Canada 16.9 percent and US 14.4 percent on gender economic empowerment.

There are a number of reasons for why women did not participate equally in the workplace like males, firstly past policies were more gender insensitive, cultural patterns placed women in domesticated positions such as secretaries because they feminine and compassionate. Whereas majority managerial positions are assigned to men because they masculine and tough. Hence, employment changes have undermined the effectiveness of redress legislation.

When considering the success of redress legislation, we need to consider the nature of employment in the labour market by assessing the pressures from international labour markets as well as recent trends of employment. Like the Skills Development Act it negatively affected employment creation because they have increased non wage cost of labour. Secondly Affirmative
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Action is also viewed as a diversity management tool. According to Human affirmative action “ is a temporary intervention to achieve equal opportunities and to eliminate disparities between diverse employees” (1996: 2)).

Note, there tends to be confusion between affirmative action and EEA, well evidently enough they are both government initiatives that promoted fairness for “ a specific group” that shows the pool of skills available in the labour market. As highlighted in the topic “ targeting specific groups poses danger” I support this statement because managing diversity should not put a label on individuals as noted by Beall because as individuals we differ even in our abilities. When we use iversity management based on differences, we note that these differences tend to lock people into distinct categories, and can imply social discrimination(Cassim 2012) hence the “ danger”. Take for instance a black student from a rural background and one from the suburbs then ask them to present a lecture in IOLS, there is a greater chance that the student from a suburban background will have greatercommunicationskills as opposed to the other yet they both qualified to study IOLS at tertiary level.

Hence whilst a person maybe black, he may differ greatly from other black employees (Cassim 2012). I believeit is incorrect that we may manage diversity based on stereotypes and prejudices (Herselman 2004: 157) we have about others and apply it to the organisational culture rather we understand that people share common aspects but differ gradually. Without affirmative action promoting diverse employees, organizations would rarely

have the diversity of staff to reach a stage where differences are valued and diversity is effectively managed.

We need to understand that managing diversity is crucial for the development of individuals in organisations. If we are to truly eradicate social inequalities in our society, the better management of diversity will assist organisations in doing so. Thirdly it is interesting to note that Black Economic Empowerment (BEE) is linked to employment equality just like we found affirmative action to be. Pay careful attention to the fact that BEE is not affirmative action but EEA forms part of it (Butterworth; 2001: 36).

BEE is a program launched by the South African government to redress the inequalities of Apartheid by giving previously disadvantaged groups (black Africans, Coloureds and Indians, who are South African citizens) economic opportunities (Southall 2004: 456). The main objective of BEE is to address the systematic exclusion of the majority of South Africans from full participation in the economy (Ronnie 2006: 6). But the question is, did BEE meet its objectives?

David Masondo criticized BEE accusing the ANC of collaborating with the white capitalists to transfer wealth to the black elite. This statement is supported by the minimalist approach of BEE which promotes black businessmen and black businesses in the private sector (Southall 2004: 456), due to this commonly known definition of BEE it is the reason why we view it as only favouring a few elite blacks. Few elite blacks? Target specific groups"? Is there a link here? Yes, because initially BEE also targeted a certain group of people it did not address inequality on a broader scale it was only with the advent of Broad Based Black Economic Empowerment which

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took the maximalist approach which entails the comprehensive restructuring of institutions and society which aims to empower black people on a whole as a collective (Southall 2004: 456). To answer the question of whether BEE could be used as a manager of diversity I stand to say no, because apartheid witnessed white capital built through the exploitation of black people and today from the first few years of ANC led government saw the rise of black elites.

The elites enriched themselves through BEE instead of contributing actively to the broader transformational process meaning BEE is used by black elites to comfortably position themselves. Note, apartheid created a divide between blacks and whites and today BEE has created a further divide within blacks themselves hence creating “ class” (black elite and poor blacks). Therefore I would conclude that BEE would not have dealt with diversity management effectively. Given this it is important for whites to realize that it will not be easy to resolve inequality.

Policies have been put in place to address these gaps, but how effective have they been? Another policy that has been introduced is the Basic Conditions of Employment Act, 75 of 1997 which aimed to protect workers. However it is said to contribute to failure to create more jobs in South Africa, reason being the act creates minimum working conditions that employers have to abide by, this increases cost of labor/ productivity. Some believe employers are reluctant to hire more workers (it will create more employment opportunities) due to this act.

However if implemented correctly the BCEA can have more promising benefits, it could improve working conditions of low paid workers in South

Africa. We must note that it might not have a positive effect on employment creation but has a positive effect on the composition of employment. The best diversity management tool must set out to increase productivity and the quality of work life. It encourages tolerance of those we believe are different to us and also celebrates diverse opinions and views which color a workplace.

Also it must encourage employees to understand that the needs and behaviours of other cultures will be different to ours therefore clear respectful communication is important between cultures is. Therefore a tool that I believe could manage diversity effectively is Ubuntu. In my understanding ubuntu is showing an act of humanity and compassion to others, hence, we need to accept cultural differences but manage diversity for example, respect the cultural belief of Africans, the Muslim dress code and so forth.

This concept is based on brotherhood and unity- It is a unifying vision or world view coined in the Zulu “ umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu”, meaning “ a person is a person through other persons” (Shutte, 1993: 46). I believe South Africa could find Ubuntu as a winning strategy at managing diversity instead of using methods of other points on a compass for they fail in our country because they not suited for our SA organisations for we must note that each organisation in a different region operates differently and faces different challenges.

Its’ strategy was used as a stepping stone to develop unified visions of the community and to create a sense of belonging in the workplace therefore it will encourage and motivate individuals to being team players and work as a

team effectively. What is important and a very good point is the fact that ubuntu believes the way forward and to succeed is through human dignity and respecting one another. Hence, if South African organisations aim to be competitive and to manage diversity appropriately simultaneously, they need to adopt it as a practice within their processes.

As a management approach it should address the main challenge in South Africa which is the lack of skills, how so? By training the current scholars with the goal to develop skills within them. Mindsets of individuals must shift away from assigning people labels because this creates more problems on its own. Using ubuntu to manage diversity will lead to people working together and reach a point of competitive spirit and advantage (Cassim 2012). Lastly we must pay attention to the fact that ubuntu is an attempt to move away from solidifying identities based on race etc. as it creates a “danger”. In conclusion since South Africa’s first democratic elections in 1994 that country has underwent great transformations in the workplace. As we see today the growing number of women entering the labour force and the inclusion of blacks. However one of the biggest challenges faced by South African organisation’s is managing our cultural differences that hinder progress. It is advent that diversity is not going away especially as we continue to develop policies that “target a specific group” all we are doing by singling a group we are enlarging the gap between the haves and the have-nots. Diversity is here to stay and all leaders and managers have to find methods that will help eradicate inequalities based on social constructs and cope with diversity. Implementation of social policies led to South Africa redefining itself as a non racial and democratic society. Research shows that

parliament merited the employment equity act which is said to have eradicated inequalities in the business organisations towards true meaning of diversity.

As stated above diversity problems will always be tattooed over our country because for centuries it was faced with oppression which lead to blacks feeling inferior and as a result to date some blacks believe that they are less capable than whites. These stereotypes lie beneath the surface but are still very much alive and shouting. Sad reality is that our labour market is still dominated by white ownership and management. Some believe that opportunities for whites irrespective of their income or educational status remain abundant.

There have been a number of wealthy blacks rising, and a rise in the middle class thanks' to the development of BEE. However not all is lost, on the positive side, the number of blacks in higher education dramatically increased, the number of blacks as business owners' increased, black managers and black professionals have increased. But yes on the other end of the scale the quality of education received in primary years is still questionable. The question is when will we stop using race as a measure in employment?

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