This paper reports on a dilemma we encountered in the course of researching how people manage diversity in Australian organizations – namely, that while the rhetoric of managing diversity clearly has considerable currency in the business arena, the practice of managing diversity appears to be considerably less visible. (By practice, we refer to what is actually done in the name of managing diversity). This lack of visibility can be attributed to two main limitations in the extant literature. Firstly, there appears to be more emphasis on rhetoric than practice in the managing diversity literature. Secondly, representations of managing diversity appear to be fragmented across levels of analysis and disparate bodies of literature such as organizational behaviour, human resource management, and research relating to specific diversity dimensions such as gender, race and ethnicity, class, age, and so on. This focus on rhetoric, in company with analytical and literary fragmentation, generates simplistic representations of managing diversity which keep its complex, contextual and political nature hidden. In doing so, these limitations compromise our capacity to ‘see’, understand and explain managing diversity.

Our response to this dilemma has been to articulate a more integrated vision of managing diversity through applying a practice-based perspective (Bengtsson, Sandberg, & Dall'Alba, 2006; Gherardi, 2006). Such a perspective has the capacity
to help make managing diversity visible through focusing on doing rather than rhetoric. Additionally, such a perspective has the capacity to draw connections between detailed activity and broader organizational and societal contexts, and thus capture the contextual and political complexities of managing diversity. Finally, a practice perspective’s multi-disciplinary nature enables connections to be built between disparate bodies of literature to generate more integrated understandings and representations of managing diversity.

In the following paper, we draw on a specific practice-based interpretation premised on three concepts of praxis, practitioners, and practices (Whittington, 2006), to illustrate these claims. This acts as a meta-theoretical framework, conceptualising managing diversity as practice, enabling us the access this phenomenon is particular ways.
INTRODUCTION: A DILEMMA & A RESPONSE

“Practice is perfectly happy to stay in the background, supporting our daily commerce with the world without the need to come into the spotlight. In this sense, practice always needs to be brought to the fore, it needs to be made visible” (Nicolini, 2006, p. 2).

Recently, in the course of exploring how it is people manage diversity in Australian organizations, we encountered a dilemma: while the rhetoric of managing diversity clearly has considerable currency in the business arena, the practice of managing diversity appears to be considerably less visible. (By practice, we refer to what is actually done in the name of managing diversity).

We attribute this lack of visibility to two main limitations in the extant literature. Firstly, there appears to be a greater emphasis on rhetoric than practice in the managing diversity literature. Secondly, representations of managing diversity appear to be fragmented across bodies of literature and levels of analysis. This focus on rhetoric, in company with analytical and literary fragmentation, generates simplistic representations of managing diversity which keep managing diversity’s complex, contextual and political nature hidden. In this way, these limitations compromise our capacity to ‘see’, understand and explain managing diversity.

Our dilemma therefore is to make the day-to-day practice of managing diversity more visible, through responding to these limitations. Our response has been to articulate a more integrated vision of managing diversity through applying a practice-based perspective (Bengtsson et al., 2006; Gherardi, 2006). Such a perspective has the capacity to help make managing diversity visible through its focus on doing rather than rhetoric. Additionally, it has the capacity to draw connections between detailed activity and broader organizational and societal contexts, and thus capture the contextual and political complexities of managing diversity. A practice-based perspective’s multi-disciplinary nature also enables connections to be built between disparate bodies of literature to generate more integrated understandings and representations of managing diversity.

In the following section, we outline and explain our dilemma in more detail. We then turn to apply a specific practice-based framework, premised on the three concepts of praxis, practitioners, and practices (Whittington, 2006), to illustrate how a practice-based perspective can respond to this dilemma. Following this, we present some implications of this framework for research in the field of managing diversity, including discussing some future research possibilities.
VISIBLE RHETORIC: MANAGING DIVERSITY AS “SUSHIOLOGY”

Since its emergence in the late 1980’s, the concept of managing diversity has grown in popularity and therefore visibility in the lexicon of business language. So much so that today it appears embedded in the corporate psyche of many western developed countries. Since the publication of the Hudson Institute’s Workforce 2000 (Johnston & Packer, 1987) in the United States, there has been a surge in diversity rhetoric (Edelman, Fuller, & Mara-Drita, 2001; Mavin & Girling, 2000). This publication forecast dramatic changes in the composition of the American workforce and an accompanying impending economic crisis if organizations failed to adequately respond to this. In making these claims, Workforce 2000 constructed a threat which was picked up by the professional management literature and made “into a full-blown crisis with rhetoric that justified and necessitated a major change in management style” (Edelman et al., 2001, p. 1614).

Over time “a field of expert knowledge” has emerged and been legitimated through academic communities, educational institutions, and tools and technological systems (Gherardi, 2006). Academic communities now engage in international debates, developing and defending various diversity-related theories. Educational institutions such as universities, government agencies, and diversity consultants communicate and legitimate this expert knowledge through courses, workshops, textbooks, guidelines and training materials. Organizations attend to this field, utilising techniques, technologies and systems (e.g. diversity audits, diversity policies, diversity scorecards, diversity councils, diversity managers) developed on the basis of this expertise, and grouped into well-known core activities (e.g. work-life programs, women in management initiatives, disability action plans etc).

Despite some of Workforce 2000’s predictions having since been recanted (see Workforce 2020, Judy & D’Amico, 1997), diversity is now a buzzword in management circles (Edelman et al., 2001; Litvin, 1997; Miller & Rowney, 2001; Sinclair, 2006; Zanoni & Janssens, 2003). Managing diversity is applauded as an economic wonder child - if organizations adopt the mantra of managing diversity, improved performance, effectiveness, profitability and revenue generation are there for the taking (Cox & Beale, 1997; Richards, 2000; Wright, Ferris, Hiller, & Kroll, 1995). Popular books on how to manage diversity have rushed off the printing press (Ivancevich & Gilbert, 2000) (e.g. Cross, Katz, Miller, & Seashore, 1994; Fernandez, 1993; Jamieson & O'Mara, 1991; Loden & Rosener, 1991). Theories of, and tools for, managing diversity have been developed and supported by a growing number of chief executive officers, training specialists, diversity consultants, and academics (Ivancevich & Gilbert, 2000). Indeed, by 2005, 76 per cent of American organizations surveyed by the US-based Society for Human Resource Management had diversity management initiatives in place (Esen, 2005). Education initiatives associated with
diversity management are estimated to be worth $10 billion annually in the United States (Lubove, 1997). Nor is such a trend unique to America. Organizations in other cultural contexts, including ‘new immigrant’ nations such as Argentina, Australia, Brazil, Canada, New Zealand, and South Africa, and ‘older’ cultural contexts such as Europe, Asia, and the Middle East (Prasad, Pringle, & Konrad, 2006) have increasingly adopting the concept. By way of example, in Australia, a survey of human resource practitioners revealed a 168 percent growth between 1998 and 2001 in the practice of diversity management in Australian workplaces (Consulting Partners Australia, 2001).

The rise and progression of diversity rhetoric follows the trajectory of many other managerial rhetorics (Edelman et al., 2001). Here, organizations are driven to incorporate structures and actions not primarily in response to the demands of their work, but rather with what is expected of them in terms of being a rational, effective and efficient organization. Responding in this way maximises their legitimacy and increases their resources and survival capabilities (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983; Meyer & Rowan, 1977). In such a way, managing diversity now exists as a discourse of fashion (Prasad & Prasad, 2002), with key players such as diversity managers and consultants using the legitimising language of managing diversity in order to be considered business savvy and worthy of receiving company resources.

While managing diversity is clearly growing in popularity and therefore visibility in the populist business arena, less is seen of it in terms of disciplined inquiry into the actual practice of managing diversity (Mavin & Girling, 2000). Skerry (2002) suggests we are engaged in “sushiology”, uncritically adopting the trappings of the diversity without really considering the practical implications for our day-to-day work and lives.

We attribute managing diversity’s lack of visibility in part to this emphasis on rhetoric over practice in the extant literature. Much of the literature on managing diversity adopts a “distant cheerleading” approach (Prasad, Mills, Elms, & Prasad, 1997), advocating change through ‘talking up’ the business benefits of managing diversity while not really addressing what this means in practical terms for organizations and individuals. In this sense, managing diversity can be described as a “façade of legitimacy”, there being a decoupling between managing diversity as rational myth and managing diversity as what actually gets done (Meyer & Rowan, 1977).

**INVISIBLE PRACTICE: DOING MANAGING DIVERSITY**

With this in mind, we ask what is it that is actually done in the name of managing diversity? This can be a difficult question to respond to. Such a claim may sound surprising given the volume of literature dedicated to the topic, much of which reveals
fairly consistent understandings and representations. Specifically, the literature suggests when people in the workplace are asked to ‘manage diversity’, they are charged with generating competitive advantage to organizations, primarily through enabling them to develop cultures that are inclusive of all personal differences (Cox, 2001; Fernandez, 1991; Jackson & Associates, 1992; Jamieson & O’Mara, 1991; Kandola & Fullerton, 1994; Loden, 1996; Triandis, Kurowski, & Gelfand, 1994). But what exactly is entailed in this undertaking?

**Literary & Analytical Fragmentation**

Reflecting on this question highlights the fragmented nature of the field of managing diversity, with representations of this phenomenon being dispersed across bodies of literature and levels of analysis. Significant contributors to the field can be found in organizational behaviour, cross-cultural management, human resource management, organizational culture and a variety of critical theoretical perspectives (e.g. feminism, cultural studies, post-structuralism, postcolonial theory). Additionally, within each of these bodies of literature, research is fragmented across specific diversity dimensions such as class, gender, race and ethnicity, sexual orientation, age, disability, and so on. The visibility of managing diversity is further obscured through each of these bodies of literature tending to focus on micro-, meso- or macro-levels of analysis and in so doing generate fragmented understandings of the phenomenon. This literary and analytical fragmentation not only prevents research in one stream from capitalizing on theoretical developments from another (Kulik & Bainbridge, 2006), it also adversely impacts upon our sense of what exactly is entailed in managing diversity (O’Leary & Sandberg, 2006). In the section below we elaborate on these claims, discussing how various contributors to the field of managing diversity tend to focus on one level of analysis or other.

**Micro: Intra-Organizational Level**

By micro-level of analysis, we refer to intra-organizational research that examines issues relating to how people within organizations manage diversity. Only a handful of texts attend specifically to this topic (e.g. Carr-Ruffino, 1998; Cox & Beale, 1997; Hogan-Garcia, 2003; Holmes, 2006; Iwata, 2004; Plummer, 2003; Thomas & Woodruff, 1999). Clear guidance at this level (Chrobot-Mason & Ruderman, 2004; Thomas & Woodruff, 1999), particularly empirically and theoretically informed guidance, remains elusive (Cassell & Biswas, 2000; Dick, 2003; DiTomaso & Hooijberg, 1996; Ivancevich & Gilbert, 2000; Prasad et al., 1997), with research indicating managers are often using untested assumptions as the basis for their actions (Wise & Tschirhart, 2000).
Other indirect sources of intra-organizational guidance exist however these are dispersed across organizational psychology (specifically organizational behaviour), and cross-cultural management. Organizational psychology has provided important contributions through applying theories of social cognition, social identity and intergroup relations to workforce diversity (Pringle, Konrad, & Prasad, 2006). Within this field of study, organizational behaviour (e.g. Ashkanasy, Härtel, & Daus, 2002; Ramsey & Latting, 2005; Stockdale & Crosby, 2004; Terry, 2003), particularly material relating to work group composition (e.g. Chrobot-Mason & Ruderman, 2004; Tsui, Egan, & O'Reilly, 1992; Tsui & Gutek, 1999; Williams & O'Reilly, 1998), has provided particular insights. This literature consists largely of empirical research investigating the impact of group demographic heterogeneity on group performance. It indicates that diverse groups are less cohesive (Lichtenstein, Alexander, Jinnet, & Ullman, 1997), characterised by more task and emotional conflict (Pelled, Eisenhardt, & Xin, 1999) and more likely to suffer withdrawal behaviours from its members (O'Reilly, Caldwell, & Barnett, 1989). On this basis, skills in managing the inevitable interpersonal conflict that arises in diverse teams play an important role in effectively managing workplace diversity (Chrobot-Mason & Ruderman, 2004; Stockdale & Cao, 2004; Terry, 2003). Other indirect guidance can be found in cross-cultural management literature, commonly covering effective communication and leadership across cultures and national boundaries, the international experience of (expatriate) workers, and cultural intelligence (e.g. Black, Mendenhall, & Oddou, 1991; Chang & Tharenou, 2004; Gudykunst, 1994; Javidan & House, 2001; Triandis, 2006).

When brought together, these bodies of literature provide clear and concise summaries of what is entailed in managing diversity at the individual and work group level – summaries that lend themselves well to empirical quantitative testing. Managing diversity tends to be described in the form of lists of various cognitive attributes possessed by individuals such as: knowledge of diversity; knowledge of oneself; conflict management skills; inclusive communication and interpersonal skills; commitment to diversity; empathy and sensitivity to diversity; and tolerance for ambiguity and complexity (O'Leary & Sandberg, 2006).

While such literature provides clear concise descriptions of managing diversity, it does have a ‘down side’. Firstly, despite the wide range of demographic dimensions investigated, there has been little effort to conduct more integrative studies that examine the joint effects of multiple demographic dimensions (Kulik & Bainbridge, 2006). Secondly, these micro-level studies can generate overly simplistic descriptions which assume diversity can be managed by adopting a linear ‘do-this-first-and-then-do-that’, ‘quick-fix’ approach (Cross, 2000; Kirby & Harter, 2003). Such approaches treat managing diversity as a phenomenon that exists independently of any cultural or socio-political context (Cassell & Biswas, 2000; Jones, Pringle, & Shepherd, 2000; Pringle et al., 2006). Consequently, researchers often fail to
consider how broader contexts can act in political ways shaping and constraining the ways organizations and people within these manage diversity (Litvin, 1997; O'Leary & Sandberg, 2006). This is in part a function of much of the language being rooted in psychology, which commonly situates the fundamental mechanisms driving diversity dynamics within individuals, making structural forces, historical contexts, and the influence of power/dominance relations between groups less visible (Prasad, Pringle, & Konrad, 2006; Zanoni & Janssens, 2003).

Meso: Organizational Level

In this paper meso-level of analysis refers to research that examines issues relating to how organizations manage diversity. The bulk of managing diversity literature focuses on this level of analysis – that is, it examines and talks of what ‘organizations’ do when managing diversity (DiTomaso & Hooijberg, 1996). The organization ‘has’ the managing diversity strategy or diversity council or ‘does’ the diversity scorecard assessment. While there is some acknowledgment of external macro-organizational forces, primacy is clearly ascribed to organizational structures, processes and values (Siegel, 2003).

This type of guidance tends to be dispersed across literature relating to human resource management and, to a lesser extent, organizational culture. Human resource management literature has told us much about how diversity can be strategically managed using diversity management programs and initiatives (Kossek, Lobel, & Brown, 2006; Pringle et al., 2006). It commonly talks of the significance of organizations integrating diversity into its vision, values and strategy, engendering commitment from the top, and holding managers accountable for change.

According to Miller and Rowney (2001), literature relating to organizational culture has also contributed to understandings of managing diversity, albeit to a lesser degree. They refer us to the work of Cox (1991) who constructed a model of “the multicultural organization”, and of Thomas (1990), who encouraged organizations to audit their corporate cultures and based his book Beyond race and gender: Unleashing the power of your total work force by managing diversity (1991) on a theoretical framework in organizational culture and total quality management.

Literature focusing on the meso-level of analysis has a number of limitations. Firstly, as with micro-level studies referred to previously, organizational guidance is often fragmented across research relating to a particular diversity dimension such as gender, race and ethnicity, age and so on. Commonly, the focus here is on specific programs – for instance, women in leadership (e.g. Vinnicombe & Singh, 2003), work/life programs (e.g. Anderson, Coffey, & Byerly, 2002), managing cross-generational teams (e.g. Zemke, Raines, & Filipczak, 2000) etc. One of the ‘down
sides’ of this fragmentation is that lack of dialogue and integration between various initiatives can result in people who experience ‘double-disadvantage’ (e.g. black women) feeling their interests are lost between separate equality initiatives (e.g. race and gender initiatives) (Liff & Dale, 1994; Liff & Wajcman, 1997).

Secondly, and again as with micro-level studies, meso-level literature tends to overlook the significance of intra-organizational work and extra-organizational contexts in shaping the ways diversity is managed. It talks in mainly high level terms about micro-level activity – that is, how people in organizations manage diversity – and commonly limits such discussions specifically to how the diversity manager, the human resource manager, or the diversity consultant manages diversity. Additionally, this literature is somewhat prone to treating managing diversity as existing independently of any extra-organizational contexts (e.g. cultural, social, linguistic, temporal, socio-political), and so it overlooks the role of these contexts in shaping the ways organizations and people within these manage diversity (O’Leary & Sandberg, 2006).

**Macro: Extra-Organizational Level**

The least well explored terrain is the body of work examining managing diversity at the macro or extra-organizational level (Pringle et al., 2006). Much of this adopts a more critical worldview, examining the political implications of societal diversity-related discourses. Important contributions have been made by sociological research on difference, drawn from feminist theory, postcolonial theory, poststructuralism, critical theory and cultural studies (e.g. Jones, 2004; Jones & Stablein, 2006; Liff & Wajcman, 1997; Prasad, 2001; Prasad et al., 1997; Prasad et al., 2006). For example, some scholars have explored whether the rhetoric of managing diversity affords space to social justice arguments (Mavin & Girling, 2000). Others have mapped the emergence of managing diversity as a powerful managerial discourse (Jones et al., 2000; Lorbiecki & Jack, 2000; Miller & Rowney, 2001; Sinclair, 2000), reflecting on whose interests are served and whose are marginalized by this discourse (Kirby & Harter, 2003), and critiquing the literature from a conceptual base focusing on power relations between identity groups (Linnehan & Konrad, 1999).

Other indirect sources of extra-organizational guidance on the practice of managing diversity are dispersed across research relating to various diversity dimensions such as class (Scully & Blake-Beard, 2006), gender (Alvesson & Billing, 1997; Martin & Collinson, 2002), race and ethnicity (Nkomo, 1992), disability (Hahn, 1985; Oliver, 1990) and so on. Though research in this area, in contrast to micro- and meso-level studies, is beginning to attend to intersections between different dimensions of
diversity, highlighting issues such as gendered racism, racist sexism and gendered ageism (Pringle et al., 2006).

Unfortunately, the contributions of much of this extra-organizational guidance are overlooked in the field of managing diversity – overall, the literature remains largely ‘uncontaminated’ by much of this more critically-oriented research (Sinclair, 2000; Zanoni & Janssens, 2003). Such an oversight is significant given these scholars play an important role in making visible the complex contextual and politically laden nature of managing diversity, in ways that intra-organizational and organizational level literature reviewed above often overlook (Kirby & Harter, 2003; Liff, 1997; Linnehan & Konrad, 1999; Prasad et al., 2006). Most books on the theory and practice of managing diversity focus on individual differences, with few addressing group-level differences and political issues relating to social justice, bias, prejudice, discrimination or oppression (Adams, Bell, & Griffen, 1997; Brazzel, 2003; Cross, 2000; Cross et al., 1994). So much so that one would never know that “difference is not only about culture and perception, but also about resource distribution and claims to privilege” (Brazzel, 2003, p. 76).

As with literature focusing on micro- and meso-level of analysis, macro-level literature also has its limitations. In particular, it can tend to overstate the role of large institutional structures and social forces in guiding human action, and thus fail to see the inter-relationships between, and mutual constituting of, social structures and social practices (Reed, 1999).

From Fragmentation to Integration

In the table below, we have attempted to illustrate this fragmentation across bodies of literature and levels of analysis. We acknowledge that it somewhat over-simplifies the situation, inevitably only including key contributors and highlighting general research tendencies within disciplines. However, we hope it assists readers develop an overarching sense of this fragmentation.
### Table 1: Managing Diversity: A Fragmented Field

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>LEVEL OF ANALYSIS</th>
<th>BODIES OF LITERATURE</th>
<th>FOCUS</th>
<th>Workforce Diversity</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Race and ethnicity</th>
<th>Age etc</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>MICRO</td>
<td>Organizational Behaviour</td>
<td>Individual attributes</td>
<td>Individual attributes needed to manage diversity</td>
<td>E.g. Impact of gender on group process/outcome</td>
<td>E.g. Impact of race/ethnicity on group process/outcome</td>
<td>E.g. Impact of age on group process/outcome</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Cross Cultural Management</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MESO</td>
<td>Human Resource Management</td>
<td>Organizational policy, program, values</td>
<td>Diversity values, policy, strategy</td>
<td>E.g. Women in leadership programs</td>
<td>E.g. Indigenous employment strategy</td>
<td>E.g. Retaining mature-age workers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Organizational Culture</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MACRO</td>
<td>Critical Theoretical Perspectives</td>
<td>Structural discourses</td>
<td>Diversity discourses</td>
<td>E.g. Relationship between sex-based discrimination and undervaluing of “women’s work”</td>
<td>E.g. Relationship between Indigenous disadvantage and “arms length” philanthropic ideals</td>
<td>E.g. Relationship between mature-age discrimination and youthful social ideals</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Evidently, representations and understandings of managing diversity are dispersed across various bodies of literature, each of which tends to focus on one level of analysis or other. Much of the literature overlooks a consideration of points of convergence between various levels and literatures - for example, reflecting on how micro-level diversity-related interactions are shaped by organizational (e.g. policy, strategy) and/or extra-organizational (e.g. societal discourses, government policy) contexts.

This failure to bridge or couple managing diversity activities at various levels is a common problem in management research more generally. Essentially, this is a ‘micro-macro’ debate in which researchers tussle with whether the researcher should focus in on intimate details of organizational life or stand back and examine the organization at a more impersonal and large-scale level (Layder, 1994; Smith, 1988).

Both approaches have their critics. Local levels of analysis, with their focus on day-to-day practices of organizational members, have been charged with failing to explain the relationships between these local practices and larger institutionalised structures (Layder 1994; Smith, 1998). Such individualistic visions of organizational order treat organizations as an aggregated outcome of individual actions that are reducible to their component parts, and thus assume ‘organization’ is “short-hand code for the behaviours of individual actors” (Reed, 1999, p. 41). In so doing, they leave larger social forces on one side in an under-theorised category of ‘context’ (Whittington, 2006, p. 617). Conversely, global levels of analysis have been charged as being over-impressed by large social forces, forgetting the micro (Schatzki, 2005) and failing to “see the dialectic between and mutual constituting of social structures and social practices” (Reed, 1999, p. 41).

Evidently, there is a need to develop a more integrated vision of managing diversity (Ross-Gordon & Brooks, 2004), one that builds closer connections between what goes on deep inside organizations and broader phenomena outside (Whittington, 2006). Failure to do so not only keeps managing diversity invisible through fragmentation across levels of analysis and bodies of literature, it also runs the risk of generating excessively simplistic representations of managing diversity that overlook the significance of context and power for this phenomenon.

MAKING MANAGING DIVERSITY VISIBLE: APPLYING A PRACTICE-BASED PERSPECTIVE

In this paper we offer a practice-based perspective (Bengtsson et al., 2006; Gherardi, 2006) as one way forward. Such a perspective holds the potential to better explicate and make visible what is entailed in the management of workplace diversity. In particular, we draw on Whittington’s (2006) practice-based interpretation premised on the three concepts of praxis, practitioners, and practices. This interpretation acts as a meta-theoretical framework, conceptualising managing diversity as practice, enabling us to access this phenomenon in
particular ways. Below we provide an overview of a practice-based perspective and Whittington’s particular interpretation, before turning to describe how this can help make managing diversity visible.

**Practice-Based Perspective**

Increasingly scholars are advancing understandings of knowing and learning in organizations through adopting various practice-based approaches (Bengtsson et al., 2006; Gherardi, 2000; Nicolini, Gherardi, & Yanow, 2003). These approaches draw on a combination of philosophical and theoretical traditions such as Marxism, phenomenology, pragmatism, post-structuralism, symbolic interactionalism, Vygotsky’s social constructivism, and Wittgenstein’s later philosophy (Bengtsson et al., 2006; Nicolini et al., 2003; Sandberg & Pinnington, 2006).

While there are a diverse array of practice-based approaches (e.g. actor-network theory, activity theory, communities of practice and situated learning, cultural perspectives on organizational learning, socio-cultural theories), each with its own conceptualisation of practice, common themes are evident (Nicolini et al., 2003; Schatzki, 2002; Schatzki, Knorr-Cetina, & Savigny, 2001). One of these is the notion that practice is socially and relationally constituted across contexts of social relations (Feldman & Feldman, 2006; Gherardi, 2006; Nicolini, 2006). Practice is seen as an involvement whole consisting of ourselves, others and things, including knowledge and skills (Bengtsson et al., 2006). It lies in the relations among and between human, non-human and material elements such as minds, bodies, tasks, external tools and environment (Schatzki et al., 2001), and is continually reproduced and negotiated over time and space at individual (e.g. skills, knowledge possessed), organizational (e.g. history, politics), and social levels (e.g. economic and political forces, culture) (Feldman & Feldman, 2006).


Whittington’s (2006) framework is premised on and responds to the practice theory notion that practice can be conceptualised as both something that guides activity and as activity itself (Reckwitz, 2002). Whittington (2006) describes practice using the three concepts, praxis, practitioners, and practices, and the inter-relationships between these. As practice theory emphasises relationality (Bengtsson et al., 2006), there is assumed interconnectedness between these three concepts. Praxis-practitioners-practices are not separate but parts of an interrelated whole. They are mutually connected, each linking into, informing and co-constituting the other. As researchers, we need feel no compulsion to choose micro over macro or macro over micro, for each forms part of the very substance of practice. As Whittington (2006) points out, the seeming minitiae of human activity cannot be detached from society, for the rules and resources furnished by society are essential to this action and conversely society is itself produced by this action (p. 615).
“Praxis” refers to the actual activity, the intra-organizational work that people do in relation with each other and various heterogeneous elements (e.g. tools, environment). According to Whittington (2006), the domain of praxis is wide, “embracing the routine and the non-routine, the formal and the informal, activities at the corporate centre and activities at the organizational periphery” (p. 619). Thus praxis can be routinised yet simultaneously indeterminate (Nicolini, 2006).

Then there are “practitioners”. In practice theory generally, practitioners are “seen as the critical connection between intra-organizational praxis and the organizational and extra-organizational practices that they rely on in this praxis” (Whittington, 2006, p. 620). Practitioners are organizational and societal actors or members who do or perform praxis (i.e. actual activity) and who carry its practices.

Finally, Whittington’s (2006) framework talks of “practices”. These consist of “shared routines of behaviour, including traditions, norms and procedures for thinking, acting and using ‘things’” (p. 619). Practices can be embodied in the ‘common-sense’ routines and operating procedures evident at organizational levels. They are also evident in the cultural rules, languages and procedures that guide human activity in broader extra-organizational contexts.

When brought together these three concepts provide a practice-based framework that links together different components from each concept, “according to the particular task at hand, while at the same time acknowledging their ultimate membership of an integrated whole” (Whittington, 2006, p. 620).

**SEEING MANAGING DIVERSITY AS PRAXIS-PRACTITIONERS-PRACTICES**

When applied to managing diversity, Whittington’s (2006) practice-based framework helps make this phenomenon visible through allowing us to see the micro-level praxis of managing diversity, and meso- (organizational) and macro- (extra-organization) level practices of managing diversity, and the role of practitioners in navigating the two. Particularly important in this process of making the hidden visible, is revealing the connections between managing diversity praxis, practitioners and practices. Thus this framework can help generate a vision of managing diversity which better integrates the micro-, meso- and macro-levels of analysis. The micro level is captured in the praxis undertaken by practitioners, while the meso- and macro- levels of analysis are captured in the (organisational and extra-organisational) practices that shape and in turn are shaped by this praxis.

**Managing Diversity Praxis**

Managing diversity praxis is performed when practitioners undertake all the intra-organizational, organizational, and extra-organizational activities involved in managing diversity – that is, the ‘what’ and the ‘how’ of managing diversity. Such diversity-related
activities can include: intellective cognitive-based tasks which require idea generation, decision-making and/or problem-solving (Jackson, Stone, & Alvarez, 1992); group work such as project management and client, team and meeting interactions (Williams & O'Reilly, 1998); tasks relating to communication, performance evaluation and feedback, employee development, conflict resolution, group decision-making, hiring and promotion, and delegation and empowerment (Cox & Beale, 1997); and advisory and consulting services relating to organizational management and employment law.

Managing Diversity Practitioners

Contrary to what many managing diversity texts suggest, this praxis is performed by a wide range of different types of practitioners, including both intra-organizational (e.g. managers) and extra-organizational practitioners (e.g. consultants). Many diversity texts seem to implicitly assume that it is only diversity managers, human resource managers or diversity consultants who do praxis and therefore constitute practitioners. However, a practice-based framework reveals that “practitioners” are not just those who have managing diversity as the focus for their entire work (e.g. diversity consultants, diversity managers), but also those who have this praxis as a part of their role (e.g. lawyers, managers). These are all managing diversity practitioners and it is they who perform the praxis of managing diversity, doing so in part by drawing on the various practices of managing diversity.

Managing Diversity Practices

The practices of managing diversity refer to shared norms of behaviour evident in both organizational and extra-organizational contexts. Practices can be seen in the form of ‘common-sense’ standard ways of operating and interacting in organizations (e.g. guidelines, policies, procedures, strategies, software, culture). They are also evident in the broader macro level social systems that guide human activity relating to managing diversity (e.g. government policy, socio-cultural norms). According to Nicolini (2006), some practices stand in the background (e.g. societal norms of long working hours, decentralised industrial relations government policy), while others are more obviously in the foreground (e.g. human resource information systems which ‘objectively’ determine remuneration). Being types of discourses that inform and legitimate ways of doing, practices come to define ‘good’ ways of doing managing diversity and discourage (“forget”) alternatives (Feldman & Feldman, 2006). Thus they perform power effects in addition to being dependent upon them be sustained (Bourdieu, 1990; Nicolini, 2006).

Integrating Managing Diversity Praxis-Practitioners-Practices

To make the doing of managing diversity more visible, we must do more than merely describe what managing diversity praxis, practitioners, and practices can each look like. We must also begin to bridge these concepts, describing their inter-relationships. This helps
generate a less fragmented and more cohesive and integrated vision of managing diversity as doing.

As researchers, how do we make these connections? Practice-based theorists suggest we “spiral” up and down (Gherardi, 2006), or “zoom” in and out from (Nicolini, 2006) various levels of analysis. Here, researchers observe a situated local task and then “spiral up” or “zoom out” from it to the macro-level institutional order or conversely “spiral down” or “zoom in” to the individual-in-situation. This process “enables analysis of the social connections among individuals, collectives, organizations, institutions, the situated contexts in which these connections take specific form, and all the intermediaries utilised by them – intermediaries which may be physical objects or artefacts, discourses or texts” (Gherardi, 2006, p. xviii).

If we look at the example of decentralised industrial relations government policy mentioned above, we can start to see how this works. This extra-organizational practice, premised on the ‘common-sense’ notion of individual bargaining, informs practitioners’ (e.g managers, employees, industrial relations and human resource management staff) praxis. It results in praxis in which unions are less actively involved in the ways workplace conditions are negotiated and determined. Thus, this practice and praxis have political effects - decentralised regulatory arrangements can benefit employers through providing greater industrial ‘flexibility’, but they bode ill for workers who have limited bargaining power (e.g. people who have a disability, people with family responsibilities, people who are Indigenous etc) and rely on union representation and collective bargaining to access minimum working standards (Plowman & Preston, 2005).

While this example highlights a uni-directional flow between practices, practitioners, and praxis, it should be noted that these inter-relationships flow dynamically in all directions, in response to shifting cultural, social, linguistic, temporal, and socio-political contexts. While practitioners do draw on practices when undertaking managing diversity praxis, they are not passively socialised into these practices. Instead, they enact practices in conscious and unconscious and tacit and conspicuous ways to generate both routinised and emergent ways of doing managing diversity (Feldman & Feldman, 2006; Giddens, 1984; Nicolini, 2006; Whittington, 2006).

A ‘Practical’ Example

One of the authors has a background in diversity consulting and so has witnessed and been a part of a number of managing diversity initiatives over the years. Below we draw on one particular example to highlight the contribution of this framework for making visible the contextual and political complexities of doing managing diversity.

A professional services company contacted the author, interested in hearing her thoughts on their latest diversity initiative that aimed to increase the number of women in senior
management in their organization. The company’s diversity committee, consisting of a selection of human resource management staff and (primarily male) senior managers, had decided to do this by positioning the company in the labour market as an Employer-of-Choice, in particular focussing on promoting its commitment to assisting staff achieve work-life balance. Since then, over time, the number of female senior managerial applicants and appointees had marginally increased. However, the number of internal applicants and appointees had not increased and the attrition rate for female managers overall remained considerably higher than for their male counterparts. The company’s diversity committee was puzzled - they felt they had divested considerable time and money into this initiative and yet the company was not reaping the rewards. The rhetoric of managing diversity had promised a diversity dividend and they were still waiting!

Applying Whittington’s (2006) practice-based framework assists us see and understand how this had happened. Managers in the company (i.e. intra-organizational practitioners) drew upon the set of practices available from their organizational and extra-organizational contexts. These practices had become accepted as legitimate practices for this particular industry and organization. They comprised, in part, a culture of long work hours, a preference for ‘face-time’ over outcomes, and a view of ‘the client as God’. Over time, managers had come to embody these established ways of doing business in their organization and reinforce these practices by continuing to rely on them (Whittington, 2006).

Concurrently, this practice sat alongside the human resource management and diversity management practice popular at the time that advocated organizations position themselves in the labour market as an Employer-of-Choice for women. This commonly entailed, in part, promoting the company as being committed to assisting staff balance work and family commitments. It was this extra-organizational practice that was picked up by the diversity committee (i.e. other intra-organizational practitioners).

While these two practices may initially appear to be in direct opposition, the diversity committee interpreted and connected the two in a way that allowed both practices to be enacted in day-to-day praxis. They decided to assist managers balance their work and family commitments by providing administrative and financial assistance to ‘outsource’ domestic duties to nanny and babysitting services, in addition to laundry, dry-cleaning, cleaning, shopping, and bill payment services.

‘In practice’, the effect was merely to assist managers comply with industry and organizational expectations to work long hours in the office, and be more easily at the beck and call of clients. Needless to say, female managers lured by the opportunity to work in a more ‘family-friendly’ workplace, were disappointed and disheartened and did not stay long.

The praxis, while well intended, had fallen into the trap that much managing diversity practice has been charged with - being a simplistic ‘quick fix’ (Cross, 2000; Kirby & Harter, 2003). It had failed to acknowledge and address one of the underlying reasons for women’s low
representation in management — namely, a culture and work practices inhospitable to those with care-giving responsibilities, a group in which women are disproportionately over-represented.

The author’s role as extra-organizational practitioner (i.e. managing diversity consultant) at this point in time was to expose intra-organizational practitioners to alternative practices with a view to these new practices becoming accepted as useful and legitimate, and so solidifying over time into a new recurrent practice (Whittington, 2006). Sinclair (2006) endorses such a view, finding that the job of extra-organizational practitioners is to stand outside longstanding unquestioned practices, and ask questions which take organizations beyond “knee-jerk” responses to address conflicting interests and power inequities that characterise organizational life (p. 527). (Intra-organizational) practitioner time, energy and resources would have been better spent undertaking this type of managing diversity praxis. Though more challenging and lengthier, it would have been more likely to ‘deliver a diversity dividend’ over the longer term - though admittedly perhaps not entirely in the way many companies anticipate!

In this example, we have “zoomed” in and out between praxis, practitioners, and practices to articulate connections between various practitioners, their choice of practices and the ensuing praxis. This gives us a sense of how these cohere to produce practical successes and/or failures (Whittington, 2006, p. 623). If we had focussed only on managing diversity at the organizational level, we may have failed to see the many ways extra-organizational practices constrain the praxis of managing diversity. However, “zooming out” to these extra-organizational practices made visible how the company’s praxis was inevitably mediated by what it meant to be a ‘good’ senior manager in the professional services sector.

What is hopefully evident from the above discussion is that Whittington’s (2006) practice-based framework helps make this phenomenon visible through focusing on doing rather than rhetoric. It also describes managing diversity in a more integrated way, weaving connections between detailed activity and broader organizational and societal contexts, and thus capturing the contextual and political complexities of managing diversity.

**IMPLICATIONS OF THIS PRACTICE-BASED FRAMEWORK**

Having discussed how a practice-based perspective can help make managing diversity visible, we now reflect on the implications of such a framework for the field of managing diversity. While certainly there are implications for each of the three areas of managing diversity praxis, practitioners, and practices, this framework also encourages researchers intent on one level of analysis to look for interrelationships with other levels.

**Diving into Managing Diversity Praxis**
What we noticed almost immediately upon reviewing the literature relating to ‘the what’ and ‘the how’ of managing diversity, was that there appeared to be little guidance on the praxis of managing diversity – that is, the minutiae of human activity. Certainly there was considerable micro-level research available, however much of this was premised on a psychological perspective that generated rationalistic attribute-based descriptions of managing diversity. Specifically, these approaches conceptualised managing diversity as a set of de-contextualised attributes (e.g. knowledge, skills and abilities) possessed by individuals but without explaining how these attributes come together in the day-to-day practice of managing diversity (O’Leary & Sandberg, 2006). Conducting practice-based ethnographic research could respond to this limitation in the field, through generating rich descriptions of ‘the what’ and ‘the how’ of managing diversity, while also demonstrating (through its emphasis on relationality) how attributes come together to be exercised in various contexts to form the day-to-day practice of managing diversity. Various practice-based researchers provide us with examples of such research. Gherardi (2002, 2006) for instance generates rich descriptions of the minutiae of human activity in her ethnographic research examining how novices on a building site master the practice of safety. While Sandberg and Pinnington’s (2006) empirical research on corporate law-as-practice demonstrates how attributes such as knowledge, skills and abilities can come together to form various ways of practising law.

**Broadening Our Conception of ‘Managing Diversity Practitioner’**

In the course of applying a practice-based perspective to managing diversity, the value of future research focussing on employees as managing diversity practitioners became apparent. Research examining employee experiences relating to managing diversity has been a “glaring omission” in the research literature (Pringle et al., 2006) – as indeed it has in management more generally. As Jacques (1996)) notes, the literature assumes managing is a task undertaken by managers only, thus making “invisible the numerous ways non-management employees also ‘manage’ work” (p. 4). Most of the managing diversity literature limits discussions to how the diversity manager, the human resource manager, or the diversity consultant manages diversity. This may be a result of the diversity discourses representing the interests of managers and organizations, rather than employees (Litvin, 2006). We suggest future research help open up our conception of who constitutes a practitioner, considering employees as practitioners, and exploring how their praxis parallels and differs from that of other practitioners. This may have the unexpected benefit of encouraging managing diversity to be seen as the responsibility of all, rather than remain marginalised with diversity consultants, diversity managers and human resource managers.

**What Managing Diversity Practices Are Evident? How Do They Emerge?**

Another area for future research relates to investigating what managing diversity practices exist and how these are produced and re-produced over time and space. Researchers from critical theoretical perspectives have identified a range of societal and organizational diversity discourses, revealing exploitative discourses which treat difference,
for instance, as lack, or as additional value (Jones, 2004; Zanoni & Janssens, 2003). Other research could consider what practices could be produced which would serve the (often hidden) social justice purpose of managing diversity well. Litvin (2006), for instance, suggests creating a new business case practice that acknowledges the interests of employees, focusing on providing an opportunity for everyone in an organization to learn from each other in order to enrich their lives, achieve their goals and develop the skills necessary for human survival.

Creating Connections Between Praxis↔Practitioners ↔Practices

Perhaps the most interesting questions that arise from this perspective are those relating to the inter-relationships between praxis, practitioners, and practices. We consider that understandings of managing diversity could benefit from further research that dives deep into organizations to engage with practitioners’ managing diversity activity in all its intimate detail, while also considering how this praxis is shaped by broader practices. Researchers could examine the role of practices in shaping praxis, considering questions such as: How do managing diversity practices shape day-to-day praxis? How do closely aligned practices (e.g. discourses relating to ‘inclusion’, ‘equity’, ‘workplace empowerment’) shape managing diversity praxis? Such an undertaking is important given recent calls for intensive case study research which links micro-politics to wider historical and socio-political environments (Pringle et al., 2006).

A practice-based framework also encourages researchers to investigate the reverse relationship – that is, the role of praxis in shaping practices. Such research encourages exploration of how local modifications to praxis can feed back into macro practices. It also highlights the importance of not neglecting the role of practitioners as carriers of practice and the implications this presents. As Whittington (2006) notes, “practitioners - people - are central in reproducing, transferring and occasionally innovating strategy practices” (p. 625). This research pursuit allows an interesting soiree into considering how different types of practitioners have a role in producing new practices. In the managing diversity field, reflecting on how the praxis of diversity consultant practitioners becomes practice is particularly relevant, given the managing diversity discourse has moved rapidly from “its origins in the consulting arena into the majority of textbooks in organizational theory, human resource management and other disciplines in organizational analysis (Miller & Rowney, 2001, p. 1). Perhaps future research could also usefully explore the inter-relationships between an emerging practice that features employee interests (Litvin, 2006) and employees as practitioners.

Finally, as effective praxis relies heavily on practitioners’ capacity to access and deploy prevailing practices (Whittington, 2006), this framework encourages us to consider how practitioners can be prepared for entry into effective managing diversity praxis. This question is of particular importance given ‘best practice’ suggests managers should be made accountable for managing diversity, yet indicators suggest they struggle with this
undertaking. Despite considerable resources being divested into diversity education (Lubove, 1997), organizations continue to incur diversity-related economic losses associated with discrimination- and harassment-related complaints and law suits (Brooks, Davidson, & Jackson, 2004; Utatao, 2001) and research shows people continue to experience workplace disadvantage and discrimination (Catalyst, 2003; Human Rights and Equal Opportunities Commission, 2004; Lindley, 2005; Meyerson & Fletcher, 2000; Murray & Syed, 2005; Oyer & Schaefer, 2003; Riach & Rich, 2002).
Asking More ‘Critical’ Questions

What is evident from the above discussion is that a practice-based perspective encourages the asking of research questions that generate a critical understanding of everyday managing diversity practice. A practice-based perspective can be drawn on to highlight the political nature of managing diversity and so, in turn, encourage future research which critiques the concept of ‘managing diversity’ itself. Is there, for example, even such a thing as ‘managing diversity’? Perhaps managing diversity is no different from managing more generally. Research indicates that such a viewpoint, at least amongst senior executives, is not uncommon (McCuiston, Wooldridge, & Pierce, 2004).

Alternatively, perhaps managing diversity is adequately captured simply through referring to what people should not do in the workplace, that is, unlawfully discriminate or harass. Such a viewpoint stems from managing diversity’s historical roots in civil rights and affirmative action and anti-discrimination legislation (Ivancevich & Gilbert, 2000).

Another possible critique concerns questioning the use of the very term ‘managing’ – should diversity be framed as something that can and should be ‘managed’? Cast in this way managing diversity is treated as apolitical, despite critics indicating it clearly emphasises managerial interests over those of employees (Kirby & Harter, 2003). Moreover, who is it that is to be managed, and who is doing the managing? Critical researchers would argue that managing diversity has two common but unacknowledged connotations. Firstly, that managing is a task undertaken by managers only, and secondly that it is to manage white women and people of colour on the understanding that it is these new and different others who are the problem (Cross, 2000; Zanoni & Janssens, 2003).

Asking more critical questions ensures that a practice-based application to managing diversity does not lead to an excessive focus on everyday tools and techniques, while overlooking the taken-for-grantedness that surrounds management practice (Alvesson & Willmott, 1996; Samra-Fredericks, 2005). This is an important consideration given diversity scholars have identified one of the key limitations of existing literature is its failure to capture the complex politically laden nature of managing diversity (Kirby & Harter, 2003; Liff, 1997; Linnehan & Konrad, 1999; Nkomo & Cox, 1996).
CONCLUSION

This paper has sought to bring into the foreground the practice of managing diversity, through applying the ‘practice turn’ in social theory and management research as a useful “sensitising framework” (Reckwitz, 2002). Applying a practice-based perspective moves managing diversity from rhetoric to doing, thus addressing the longstanding management concern regarding the gap between organizational policy and managerial practice. This is important if we are to avoid becoming complicit in managing diversity functioning only to consolidate power in elite management’s hands while making those hands look merely more benevolent and enlightened (Sinclair, 2006, p. 524).

A practice-based perspective also helps make managing diversity visible through drawing connections between detailed activity and broader organizational and societal contexts, and therefore capturing the contextual and political complexities of managing diversity. Currently, much of the literature addresses each level of analysis largely in isolation, thus the discipline take incomplete advantage of the overarching coherence provided by the practice turn (Whittington, 2006). The framework we have used encourages researchers to look for inter-relationships between levels of analysis, recognising that, “intra-organizational praxis is marked by extra-organizational practices; successful practices are carried by influential practitioners; praxis forms practitioners” (p. 627).

The flow–on effect of a practice-based perspective is that the more visible managing diversity becomes, the more complex it appears. This is a consequence of practice theory avoiding simple fixed stable prescriptions of professional competence (Samra-Fredericks, 2005), instead representing it as “something dynamic, open-ended and socially negotiated in the particular practice in which it is embedded” (Sandberg & Pinnington, 2007, p. 6). Capturing this complexity is important, given that existing descriptions of managing diversity have been charged with being overly simplistic and assuming diversity can be managed by adopting a linear ‘do-this-first-and-then-do-that’, ‘quick-fix’ approach (Cross, 2000; Kirby & Harter, 2003).

A practice perspective has the added benefit that its multi-disciplinary nature enables connections to be built between disparate bodies of literature to generate more integrated understandings and representations of managing diversity. Practice perspectives are evident in numerous disciplines including cultural theory, history, sociology, anthropology, science and technology studies, in addition to organizational studies, education and philosophy (Bengtsson et al, 2006; Schatzki, 2001). This characteristic encourages the researcher to draw on and bring together disparate bodies of knowledge to inform descriptions of the practice of managing diversity and in doing so generate less fragmented understandings and representations of this phenomenon. This is particularly pertinent given recent calls for diversity scholars to draw on wider theorisations in order to reverse the process of fragmentation occurring in the field (Prasad et al., 2006; Pringle et al., 2006). (Having said this we do note that some of the hesitancy to do so may well stem from
difficulties associated with navigating across paradigms (Burrell & Morgan, 1979 - though this is another discussion altogether!)

While we talk of the need for better integration in the field of managing diversity, we are wary of imposing an integrative framework that universalises “diversity”, assuming that multiple dimensions of diversity can be collapsed into one and managed by a singular approach (Linnehan & Konrad, 1999; Sinclair, 2006). In fact, we hope that the examples we have given in the paper highlight that applying a practice-based perspective is actually more likely to have the opposite effect – revealing practices which acknowledge and explicate “diversities” (Sinclair, 2006), recognising there are important points of difference between and within diversities.

While we have espoused numerous benefits of a practice-based perspective, limitations inevitably also apply. In this paper, our review of the literature was selective, limiting literature to key contributors and highlighting general research tendencies within disciplines. Exceptions will always exist. For example, when looking at micro-level research, some studies do examine interactions between group and organization (e.g. Martins, Milliken, Wiesenfeld, & Salgado, 2003), or amongst multiple diversity dimensions (e.g. Ragins, Cornwell, & Miller, 2003), while other literature is are responsive to power and the implications of dominant and marginalized group identity and membership (e.g. Konrad, 2003).

We also note that the particular practice-based framework we adopted in this paper is only one of a number of ways the practice of managing diversity could be represented. Other practice theorists from different schools of thought offer frameworks with different emphases. However, the particular advantage of this framework is that it allows connections to be made between micro-, meso- and macro- levels of analysis. Thus it is particularly well placed to respond to the limitations we identified in the field of managing diversity.

Section 1.01 References


