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Diversity (f)or real meritocracy

Equity, Diversity and Inclusion, short EDI, have become key-words in most academic institutions around the globe. The importance of being diverse, and in consequence also inclusive, is usually deemed highly important. Yet, the what and why of EDI is often less clear. Impressions arise that EDI is merely a box to tick, and practices are in consequence often performative. Even worse, some academics even see the strive for more inclusion as wrong, something a "cancel culture" is imposing on them. These thoughts aren't far from conspiracy theories, even if they come in form of academic debate. [1] Freedom of speech is then used to justify opinions or the claim is made that by promoting diversity, traditionally preferred groups are suddenly disadvantaged, and unfairly punished. The argument is brought forward that only the merit of candidates – be it for faculty positions, administrative staff or undergraduate and postgraduate students – should count in selection processes. This argument is in my experience in most cases not made with bad intend. It is rather a lack of knowledge that contributes to these debates, and maybe a diffuse feeling of negative emotions. Both these reasons are more than worth discussing.

First of all, what does EDI mean? In short, with respect of hiring practices, diversity means to make sure that candidates come from all possible different demographics and that selection processes are built to ensure that all these candidates have equal opportunities in the selection. Inclusion goes a step further – to make sure that diverse members of groups are also equally comfortable at their workplace. In other words, diversity is being invited to a party, while inclusion is being invited to dance. Diversity itself does not foster inclusion. This needs to be actively strived towards to. Equity is in this sense – at least in my definition – the ultimate goal. If a workplace is valuing diversity in its full extend, and if inclusion is a lived experience, then automatically the composition of a team (or a research institute to be statistically more robust) will reflect the demographics of the broader society. In reality, this is of course at least at present not the case, so equity also refers to action striving to reach this parity. Affirmative action, thus positive discrimination, is one of the keywords here. Another pathway towards equity are quotas. Even though quotas seem to largely work, they are not without their own complexities. Significantly weaker action than affirmative action and quotas is what most academic institutions do

– candidates from diverse backgrounds are preferentially hired compared to candidates of equal qualification that come from the majority groups. This gives a slight advantage to marginalized applicants, yet not at a statistically significant level. In either way, the idea of this action is that over time true equity will be reached and eventually these practices are no longer required.

Now, these points seem straight forward enough, period. Why is there still a conflict and debate? The conflict arises since preferential hiring of diverse candidates is generally seen as a violation of a merit-based selection system. Especially in academia, merit is a value that we hold high (a premise that by itself is worth a discussion, but this would go too far here). The implicit claim made is that in the current system not the best candidates are hired, but those that are "diverse enough". The minority group gets assigned to having an advantage – which is somehow a paradox. If they indeed had an advantage, they would not be discriminated against and consequentially found in leading positions at much higher likelihood than demographic percentages would predict. Clearly that is not the case. What in fact occurs is often much more simple – hiring practices follow the so-called Peter principle. The Peter principle (proposed by Laurence J. Peter) [2] refers to the human nature to hire people that are similar to themselves. In a bit of an oversimplification, this principle represents the little primate part of our brain that feels saver if we are surrounded by people that we know – or with people that at least are similar to ourselves. The Peter principle is amplified by classical discrimination, and by the fact that equal opportunity doesn't start at hiring workforce. Discrimination and disadvantages start much, much earlier, and those candidates that come from a majority group in fact often do have the best credentials on paper. They benefit from the accumulated privilege of their whole lifetime. At the same time the Peter principle also explains the negative emotions that are mentioned above as the hire of more diverse candidate leads to a certain uneasiness at first. In order to be inclusive and in order to overcome this uneasiness, we need to jump out of our comfort zone and actively embrace diversity. This does not happen by itself.

I would thus make the point that merit-based selection and selection striving for best EDI practices are not all in conflict with each other. If we understand that the metrics we use to assess candidates might be biased towards those that are most similar to ourselves, then we can start to make assessments on true capability. A candidate from a disadvantaged background may not have as many awards as another candidate, but could that have been expected? Was that even possible for them to achieve? A candidate stemming from a poor country might not have the same practical skills as a candidate from a top university in a higher developed country. But maybe the first had to fight a lot harder and achieve much more to get their CV on your table than

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the latter. More examples could be listed, but the general sentiment should be clear. Further, by putting teams from diverse backgrounds together, we increase the chances that also a diversity of experiences and ideas can compete with each other for the best solutions. And that is what makes a good team. The Peter principle instead fosters teams in which only certain ideas and experiences prevail and are merely echoed by each other. Thus, by adopting hiring standards that strive for EDI, we are able to in fact really select the best candidates and not only the best candidates of the group we belong to ourselves. Meritocracy and EDI are thus not at all different ends of a spectrum. They are identical in aim if we rethink what meritocracy may look like.

On a personal level, I have my very own reasons to strive for diversity in my own research group. I am from a so-called diverse background myself as a trans woman. [3] More importantly though, I personally enjoy the differences of people in my own team and in the faculty I work in. I often learn more from my students than they learn from me. I benefit from truly diverse sets of ideas, and not only ideas from people who think and act like me. Conflicts may here and there arise due to differences in cultural backgrounds – but at the end these are usually beneficial and lead to better understanding of team members on the long term. And this better understanding is not restricted to cultural differences. It also applies to taking diverse approaches at solving scientific problems. It means different knowledge backgrounds can be brought in. It also means different ways of treating problems and of dealing with difficult situations. In any way, it represents competition of the best ideas – out of a broad pool of ideas. And that is what academic research and science is all about. Creation of ideas, testing them and selecting the best hypothesis to build new theories.

I am convinced that EDI practices allow me and others to build the best teams. It requires also for me – despite my own background – to constantly challenge myself and to question my own gut feelings. Just because I belong to marginalized groups [4] myself doesn't mean I automatically understand other underrepresented groups. Listening is the key for a better understanding, and the willingness to not judge a book by its cover. It is also important to understand that discrimination works on different axes and that a person might be discriminated against on one or several, but may also be advantaged on others. For instance, myself I am not only disadvantaged due to being female and trans, I also live of massive privileges coming from a white western European middle-class background. Discrimination is not a binary black and white issue as it is often treated. Being marginalised can be a question of viewpoint and is not always a mathematical absolute. There are many grey zones that are blurry at best. Also, the intersection of different axes of discrimination leads often to more than what meets the eye. Realizing this, and fully understanding these intricacies is often complicated if not impossible for a person that does not have the same or at least similar lived experience. Again, listening is the key towards success and to overcome the issues and potential prejudices involved.

Regardless, the conclusion should be clear. A narrow definition of merit in academic settings is a detriment to building truly successful and highly achieving teams. EDI – no matter what the reason for applying its policies to team building and hiring

processes are – fosters teams that are better and which are able to outcompete others by increasing the number of ideas and possible viewpoints, and by including team members that are truly champions of the demographic groups they come from. Diversity policies are not the opposite of merit-based team selections. On the contrary, diversity leads to building the best teams. Don't hire candidates from marginalized backgrounds because they are marginalized. Hire them because they provide insights and knowledge that other candidates don't. Those who are hired usually do not want to be 'diversity hires'. They want to be valued for who they are and what skills they have, not for which demographic group they represent. Often enough though skills of diverse candidates are not fully recognized, be it due to accumulated prior disadvantage or due to the Peter principle. Having said that, if selection procedures are truly looking for the best candidates, then equity will be reached at some point. Until then, choosing diverse candidates with a slight preference won't disadvantage anyone really, and for sure it is the morally right thing to do – and we should not forget about that as well.

References and notes

[1] Anna I. Krylov, *The Journal of Physical Chemistry Letters* 2021, **12**, 5371 – 5376.

[2] Peter, Laurence J., Raymond Hull. [1969] 1970. The Peter Principle. Pan Books.

[3] Tanja Junkers, Lisa Pecher, *Nachrichten aus der Chemie* 2021, **69**, 18 – 20.

[4] Not mentioning specific marginalized groups is done on purpose. Even if some groups and their underrepresentation present a more pressing issue than others, situations are always individual and it is important not to create a hierarchy of oppression.

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Tanja Junkers graduated with a PhD in physical chemistry from Göttingen University in 2006. After a postdoc at the University of New South Wales in Sydney she joined the Karlsruhe Institute of Technology as a senior scientist. 2010 she was then appointed professor at Hasselt University in Belgium. 2018 she returned to Australia, and is since a professor at the School of Chemistry at Monash University in Melbourne. Tanja is a polymer chemist with a love for flow chemistry and digital chemistry and an associate editor for the journals Chemical Science and Polymer Chemistry. Next to that she is a strong LGBTIQA+ advocate and a trans woman herself.