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Constructing a ‘Different’ Strength: A Feminist Exploration of Vulnerability, Ethical Agency and Care

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Abstract

This article explores how ethical agency, as ‘other-oriented’ caring, emerged from feelings of being ‘different’ in a cultural organization by drawing on feminist ethics of care. By analyzing interview material from an ethnographic study, we centralize the relationship between feelings of being ‘different,’ vulnerability and the development of sensibilities, practices and imaginaries of care. We elaborate on how vulnerability serves as a ground for caring with rather than for others, and illustrate how it allowed individuals to challenge both organizational, normative diversity discourses and essentialization of differences. We contribute to the literature on critical diversity management by furthering problematizations of instrumental diversity management from the perspective of care, and to the organizational literature on feminist care ethics by empirically exploring how ethical agency emerges from tensions related to feeling ‘different.’ While previous studies have shown how marginalized individuals use their sense of ‘otherness’ to negotiate, conform to and resist organizational norms, practices and discourses, we provide further insights on how it also can drive concern and care for others, and thus serve as possible ground for ethical change initiatives within organizations.

Keywords Vulnerability · Care ethics · Diversity · Difference

Introduction

Diversity management has received increased scholarly and organizational attention due to demographic and structural changes in society, and the subsequent increase of the number of individuals from diverse backgrounds within organizations (Ahonen et al., 2014; Holck, 2016; Holck et al., 2016). The underlying assumption is that diversity contributes to organizational productivity, creativity and profitability when it is properly ‘managed’ (e.g., Robinson and Dechant, 1997), that is, when its advantages are utilized, and its disadvantages minimized (Robertson, 2006). This implies that diversity is an issue to be addressed, and that it should contribute to organizational goals to be

valued. Critical scholars have increasingly problematized such an approach for being overly instrumental (Lorbiecki & Jack, 2000; Zanoni et al., 2010), and for unreflexively promoting social cohesion and assimilation (Holck & Muhr, 2017; Risberg & Söderberg, 2008). Others have argued that diversity management functions as a form of control that reduces those perceived as ‘others’ (due to, for example, gender, race, ethnicity or physical ableness) into categories that reinforce and/or neutralize asymmetrical power relations (e.g., Ahonen & Tienari, 2015; Ahonen et al., 2014) between the dominant norm and the vulnerable ‘others’. This obscures the organizational support for diverse, inclusive cultures since ‘otherness’ is essentialized according to categories of assumed difference while normative forms are being privileged.

To challenge this, scholars have directed attention to the micro-politics of diversity management, and how individuals negotiate, conform to and resist organizational norms, practices and discourses related to diversity within organizations (e.g., Jammaers et al., 2016; Van Laer & Janssens 2017; Zanoni & Janssens, 2007; Zanoni et al., 2017). These studies have problematized the instrumentality of diversity management, as well as the scholarly oversight of

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individual agency in resisting diversity management discourses and practices. However, while providing insights into how marginalized individuals use their sense of ‘being different’ in a self-oriented manner (e.g., Zanoni et al., 2017), the intersubjective and ‘other-oriented’ aspects of these relations have thus far been underexplored. Little empirical attention has, for instance, been directed to how feelings of being ‘different’ or vulnerable may inform relations and practices that concern others, or possibly support the emergence of ethical organizing marked by corporeal openness toward others, that is, based on interconnectivity, reciprocity and respect (e.g., Pullen & Rhodes, 2015a, 2015b; Pullen & Vachhani, 2020; Tyler, 2019).

In this paper, we address this gap by building on existing work on the micro-politics within diversity management (Zanoni & Janssens, 2007; Zanoni et al., 2017). We delve into the notion of vulnerability and draw on feminist ethics of care (Johansson & Edwards, 2021; Nicholson & Kurucz, 2019; Simola, 2015)—an embodied, ethical approach focusing on the formation of reciprocal, empathic and responsive relations (Borgerson, 2007; Gotsis & Kortezi, 2012)—to explore the strengths of being ‘different’ in the context of diversity management. We focus on how individuals negotiate the embodied sense of being ‘different’ and centralize their feelings about being outsiders, deviant from the overtly emphasized organizational norms and bodily ideals. We connect these sentiments to a relational view on vulnerability and care, to capture and theorize the sense and recognition of corporeal connectedness, based on which the ‘other-oriented’ ethical agency of care emerged and affects change. Here, ‘negotiation’ is understood as an ongoing process of individuals making sense of their feeling of ‘difference’ by relating to the organizational norms and to others in the organization. Our work is guided by the following questions:

1. How do individuals negotiate a sense of being different?
2. How does this inform the emergence of ethical agency as ‘other-oriented’ caring?

To address these questions, we draw on interview material from an ethnographic study of a Swedish theater company (hf. SPAC). SPAC is a publicly funded organization that seeks to promote equality and diversity in its various cultural productions, while also actively working toward broadening its audiences. Given how questions regarding equality, diversity and inclusion are central to the work of SPAC, the organization provides an interesting case for studying diversity management through an intersubjective lens.

Our findings indicate that vulnerability—arising from a sense of being ‘different’—contributed to sensitizing individuals to inequalities and further prompting a sense of responsibility to care with others (Tronto, 1993, 2013).

Instead of limiting their agency, vulnerability thus became an important source of agentic strength and a means through which individuals developed caring ethical relations, and organizational change initiatives related to diversity and inclusion. As the sense of being vulnerable—emerged from individuals’ constant comparison with the norms—supported the emergence of ‘other-oriented’ sensibilities, practices and imaginaries marked by respect and reciprocity, it further challenged the reproduction of individualization and the essentialization of differences at SPAC.

With this paper, we make a two-fold contribution. First, we contribute to the literature on critical diversity management by incorporating notions of feminist care ethics to further explore ethical issues attributing to essentializing and marginalizing ‘others’ in normative diversity management. By focusing on the linkage between an embodied and relational view on vulnerability and care, our work promotes the understanding of feelings of being ‘different’ as an agentic source for ‘other-oriented’ ethical practices (Zanoni & Janssens, 2007; Zanoni et al., 2017). Second, we respond to organizational scholars’ call for furthering the discussion of feminist ethics of care (Johansson & Edwards, 2021; Nicholson & Kurucz, 2019; Pullen & Vachhani, 2020; Simola, 2015) with an empirical exploration on how embodied vulnerability paves grounds for and strengthens *caring with* (e.g., Tronto, 2013).

Literature Review

Diversity Management and the Essentialization of Difference

The instrumental approaches to diversity management have received increasing critical attention with regard to its capabilities of promoting organizational inclusion and equality (Ahonen et al., 2014; Holck, 2016; Holck et al., 2016). One centralized issue has been how ‘managing’ diversity often contributes to marginalizing those who are meant to be ‘included’ as they are offered precarious, low-status positions in organizations, while emphasis is placed on encouraging normative ways of ‘being’ (Holck & Muhr, 2017; Ortlieb et al., 2021; Zanoni & Janssens, 2004). Holck & Muhr (2017), for instance, illustrate how an emphasis on ‘equality as sameness’ contributed to the organizational devaluation of marginalized individuals’ skills, knowledge and labor instead of an appreciation and support of difference. Romani et al. (2019) also found that diversity initiatives resulted in discrimination as those who were seemingly committed to supporting marginalized employees continuously placed them on the receiving end of ‘care,’ which contributed to reproducing asymmetrical power relations in benevolent ways. With that, presumed differences were essentialized

and competences and skills negated. In both of these cases, marginalized individuals were approached as 'objects' of diversity management and thus as 'different' and in need of help. The logic of these initiatives can be understood as grounded in a neo-assimilationist shift (Joppke, 2004; Kofman, 2005), evident in the pressure to conform to norms of a 'model employee,' often being seen as a white, straight and normatively able-bodied man.

Adding to these structural critiques, scholars have directed attention to the micro-politics of diversity management (e.g., Jammaers et al., 2016; Van Laer & Janssens, 2017; Zaroni & Janssens, 2007; Zaroni et al., 2017). These studies have contributed to problematizing how diversity is 'done' in organizations by highlighting the meaning-making, identity work and resistance of marginalized individuals, and by further illustrating the complexity of how unequal organizational relations are continuously challenged and reproduced. The agency of marginalized individuals has thus often been explored in relation to the norm, that is, how they either resist or comply to the offered subject positions within an organization and/or broader dominant discourses. Zaroni and colleagues (2017), for example, interrogated popularized discourses in creative work which asserted 'difference' as a source of creativity, and focused on how individuals use their 'otherness' to narrate and construct their identities in productive ways. As such, being 'different' has become a means with which individuals instrumentally position themselves as advantageous in diversity discourse. However, this approach falls short in addressing how people who perceive being categorized as 'different others' (and thereby feeling vulnerable) based on race, ethnicity, gender, religion or sexual identity may challenge normative ways of organizing and further prompt 'other-oriented' sensibilities (cf. Phillips & Williat, 2020). Thus far, little attention has been given to how feelings of being 'different' possibly inform relations and practices that concern others, especially in terms of diversity management.

Building on existing critique of instrumental diversity management, in particular work that centralizes the agency of marginalized individuals (Zaroni & Janssens, 2007; Zaroni et al., 2017), we explore the emergence of ethical agency, as 'other-oriented' caring, through feminist ethics of care (Johansson & Edwards, 2021; Nicholson & Kurucz, 2019; Simola, 2015). We, thereby, align with scholars who have argued for the importance of developing more 'ethical sensitivity' (Borgerson, 2007) within diversity management work. To do this through the lens of feminist care ethics, we delve into the linkage between vulnerability and care (Hamington, 2004) to explore the relational agentic strength of 'difference.' Without denying or overlooking minority individuals' identity bewilderment and struggles when they face tension from overt organizational norms, with this work, we aim to focus on how the feelings of being

'different' can prompt 'other-oriented' sensibilities and ethical practices of care.

Exploring Organizational Care Practices Through a Feminist Lens

In recent years, feminist ethics of care has increasingly been discussed within organization- and management studies (e.g., Alacovska & Bissonnette, 2021; Borgerson, 2007; Johansson & Edwards, 2021; Machold et al., 2008; Phillips & Williat, 2020; Pullen & Vachhani, 2020; Simola, 2015; Lawrence and Maitlis 2012). It can be understood as part of an embodied ethical 'turn' (Pullen & Rhodes, 2014) where affectual relations, care and compassion are emphasized instead of judgements based on rationality, policies or regulations (Hamington and Sander-Staudt, 2011; Hancock, 2008; Pullen & Rhodes, 2015a, 2015b; Tyler, 2019). By challenging structures of demarcation, feminist ethics of care foregrounds the possibilities of affective reach and responsiveness between individuals and/or groups and in organizations (Liedtka, 1996). The notion has previously been discussed in the contexts of leadership (Johansson & Edwards, 2021; Nicholson & Kurucz, 2019; Pullen & Vachhani, 2020), corporate governance (Machold et al., 2008), creative work (Alacovska & Bissonnette, 2021) and responsible action (Simola, 2015).

Research on feminist care ethics has, for instance, explored the emergence of caring relations in various organizational settings. Among them, Phillips and Williat (2020) offer insights on how embodiment disruptive experiences contributed to allowing individuals to better understand the situations of others and drove activist practices seeking to address injustices. Moreover, feminist ethics of care has been used to direct attention to care in the process of community building. Young (1986) has, for example, noted how caring can allow for community relations that maintain an openness to 'unassimilated others,' that is, those different from the norm, when premised on recognizing differences in both needs and responsibilities among community members. As such, care is understood as possibly facilitating the emergence of relations that are grounded in the acknowledgment of diverse interests and experiences, where members come together to attend to the particular situations of others, and work toward just solutions to conflicts and collective problems across positions of difference (e.g., Alacovska & Bissonnette, 2021).

Inspired by these works, we draw on feminist care ethics in our exploration of 'ethical sensitivity' (Borgerson, 2007) that may contribute to the cultivation of caring relationships and practices in the context of diversity management. Thus, for this work, focusing on the group of individuals who are frequently designated as the 'target' in normative diversity management approaches, we set out to uncover

how ‘other-oriented’ care practices may arise from their embodied experience of being ‘different,’ and thereby exert generative effects. We accomplish this aim by delving into the linkage between vulnerability and care (e.g., Hamington, 2004; Noddings, 2013; Tronto, 2013). Through conceptualizing the sense of being different within a feminist, relational understanding of vulnerability, we reveal how caring practices emerge to attend to the needs, emotions, and future growth of others.

An Embodied, Relational View on Vulnerability and Care: The Theoretical Frame

The term *vulnerability* is derived from the Latin *vulnus* (‘wound’) and signifies the “individual’s capacity to be open to a variety of wounds” (Wainwright & Williams, 2005, p. 29). Instead of understanding it as merely a marginalizing condition, *embodied vulnerability* has been defined as the basis of our existence (Crowther, 1993), the very condition of becoming (e.g., Shildrick, 2002: 133). Following this notion, vulnerability is described as an intrinsic ability of humans to be open to our experiences, to reflect upon our physical and mental state of existence, and to “navigate through the social (and natural) world” (Wainwright & Williams, 2005: 29; Hamington, 2004).

The relational view argues for the corporeal, affective and socio-political interdependency between people. As such, vulnerability is understood as a pre-condition for a person’s ability to connect with others (Mackenzie et al., 2014). The embodied nature of vulnerability creates an intracorporeality where care imaginations about others emerge, which, in turn, foster possibilities for empathy and sympathy, the much-needed elements for care and relationality (Hamington, 2004; Pullen & Vachhani, 2020). Thus, vulnerable experience enables us to reach out to people either close to or outside our immediate context (Hamington, 2004) who we assume to be experiencing similar situations.

Furthermore, this relational understanding of vulnerability is key for feminist ethics of care (Hamington, 2004) as it highlights how responsibility for care emerges through the embodied recognition of the needs of others rather than from duties or principles (Tronto, 1993). This implies a respect for others’ embodied experience, needs and autonomy (Held, 2006; Liedtka, 1996; Noddings, 2013). The caring practices based on moral responsibilities of others thus differ from the deductive approach where people are primarily seen as self-interested equals who make moral judgements based on policies, rules and regulations (Hancock, 2008; Pullen & Rhodes, 2014, 2015a, 2015b).

Both vulnerability and care ethics are embodied phenomena. While vulnerability is an embodied sensation grounded in one’s openness, pain and possible weaknesses to others, ethical care practices require embodied, affective

knowledge for understanding others and to generate attentiveness, responsibility and responsiveness (e.g., Tronto, 1993, 2013). Hence, instead of promoting practices of ‘care taking’ through, for instance, a certain institutional position, caring through one’s own embodied senses of vulnerability may promote equal intersubjective relationships grounded in caring and feeling *with* rather than *for* others. This is because our inherent vulnerability allows for the embodied recognition of others’ needs, and more importantly, how one is situated in relation to those needs (Hamington, 2004; Hamington and Sander-Staudt, 2011). In essence, vulnerability signals an embodied opening toward others, either within or outside of one’s proximity, that can serve as a ground for the emergence of caring sensibilities, practices and imaginaries that are ‘other-oriented’ (Hamington, 2004).

In diversity management, individuals who belong to diversity categories are often seen as or perceive themselves as the target or objective of such organizational initiatives. This contributes to marking their ‘difference’ in relation to the norm (e.g., Romani et al., 2019). The feeling of being marginalized and vulnerable is inevitable as they are understood as dependent on others for care, resources or support due to an actual or perceived psychological or material condition. In what follows, we will illustrate how caring behaviors that result from one’s embodied, lived (vulnerable) experiences may contribute to a caring relation that transcends power structures, and primarily accentuates an ‘other-oriented’ perspective. Here, embodied, affective sensations and relations are seen as ethically important (Held, 2006; Liedtka, 1996; Noddings, 2013). Feelings, for instance, sympathy (feeling for someone) or empathy (feeling from the perspective of someone), that emerge from individuals’ own vulnerable experience may be enacted as emotive resources that “need to be cultivated not only to help in the implementation of the dictates of reason but also to better ascertain what morality recommends” (Held, 2006, p. 10; Hamington, 2004). This allows for equal relations where both caregiver and care receiver actively participate in a co-constitutive manner (Noddings, 2013; Tronto, 2013) in which neither disempowers nor reduces ‘others’ to an object of care (Power, 2019).

To highlight the essence of equality in caring relations, we incorporate the embodied, relational understanding of vulnerability with the feminist ethics of *caring with* to further explore the agentic aspect of being ‘different’ with a focus on ‘other-oriented’ caring. The idea of *caring with* has been developed by Tronto (2013) as an addition to her initial four phases of care: *caring about*, *caring for*, *caregiving* and *care-receiving*. These phases emphasize acknowledging unmet caring needs, the sense of responsibility for meeting these needs, the actual practices of care and how the care receiver responds. *Caring with* was added to further situate care as a dynamic relationship between caregivers and care

receivers and where special emphasis is placed on how caring aligns with commitments to justice, equality and freedom. It, thereby, allows one to draw a connection between the situated, intersubjective practices of care to societal, institutional or organizational structures of demarcation. By centralizing individuals' feeling of 'different' as the pre-condition for 'care-giving' we respond to Phillips' and Williat's (2020, p. 214) recent call for research on care practices that that "begin from the perspective of care receivers, enabling the foregrounding of minority voices that are often marginalized and excluded from discussions and decision-making surrounding social provisions and responsibilities to care."

Method

Background and the Empirical Setting

This study is part of an ethnographic project undertaken by the first author in a Swedish cultural organization, SPAC (pseudonym). The project began in August 2018 and is ongoing. The focus of the project is to examine SPAC's strategies and practices of equality, diversity and inclusion. SPAC is a publicly funded organization with a mission to grant equal access to high-quality performing arts to everyone everywhere in the country, and to ensure equality on, behind and in front of the stage. The organization operates using a collaborative model involving a vast web of stakeholders composed by a national volunteer association, the Regional Governmental Cultural Advisory Board, the municipalities, and national government representatives. The organizational structure consists of the core artistic functions, a marketing and communication department, supporting artistic functions such as the department of scenography and technique, and supporting administrative functions such as the human resources department and the IT and administration department.

SPAC seeks to comply to both European and national cultural policies. To align with the principle of multiculturalism and equal access to quality art and cultural products, the work on equality, diversity and inclusion, both within the organization and among the audience, is central for SPAC. One core diversity initiative has been to promote inclusion by recruiting ethnically non-Swedish individuals in all operational functions and departments. On the surface, the ratio between ethnic Swedes¹ and individuals with minority

¹ In this text, we are using the term 'ethnic Swede' and 'ethnically Swedish appearance' in several places to refer to a conventional view on the Swedish ethnicity. However, we have no intention to further strengthen norms that may limit the possibilities for persons of other ethnicities, for instance, who are non-Caucasian to feel belonging to the identity of being 'Swedish' by using such terms. Rather, we see it as an analytical distinction that mirrors how ethnicity was used as a means of differentiation in the studied context. We believe that it is

backgrounds is balanced in most departments, including the management team. The nine-person management team consists of four members with migrant backgrounds. Despite being successful in representation, tensions regarding diversity and differences prevail at SPAC, and this became the source of inspiration and sharing point for this study.

An Ethnographic Approach

The first author undertook participant observation at SPAC between August 2018 and December 2019. During this time, she was working in the organization while conducting the research. As a member of the Strategy Group, she participated in monthly employee meetings where organizational news was broadcasted on a stage by the CEO, and took part in bi-weekly department meetings where issues were discussed between the CEO and the strategic group. The first author kept a research diary to thoroughly record observations of meetings, informal conversations, work routines and practices as well as her reflections of her encounters at SPAC.

All employees were notified about her role as an in-house researcher in the organization and she practiced self-reflexivity when writing field notes, that is, she attempted to reflect on her observations and experiences from both the perspective of an employee and that of a researcher. These contrasting views often functioned as a critical point of departure for conceptualizing and evaluating the organization's efforts in pursuing equality, diversity and inclusion.

To complement the participant observation, the first author conducted a series of interviews. Through the convenience of being an 'insider,' the first author used the snowball method to recruit research participants. As a result, interview participants were selected from different organizational units. The interviews were conducted following a semi-structured interview guide, and the questions broadly dealt with matters such as the participants' interpretations of diversity and inclusion, their lived experiences and involvement in these practices, and their experiences in working toward achieving the organizational goals. Typical questions in the interview guide were, for example, "How do you relate to the organization's efforts in promoting diversity?", "How do such efforts influence your work or your experience at work?", "How do you implement the organizational strategy on diversity and equality in your daily work?" Besides these questions, the participants were encouraged to openly describe their interpretation, including comments or even

Footnote 1 (continued)

important to continue to challenge and make visible such racialization of citizenship and the limits it continues to place on bodies and conditions of inclusivity.

resistance regarding the organization's strategies and practices around equality, diversity and inclusion.

In total, 37 individuals (13 of whom were of different ethnic and racial backgrounds) with different expertise and geographical locations within the organization were interviewed, some of them more than once, adding up to a total of 46 interviews. The length of the interviews varied between 20 to 90 min, and the interview language was Swedish. The interviews were later transcribed in Swedish.

Understanding the Tension Between Norms and 'Differences'

During both the observations and the interviews, the first author gained insights into the organizational culture, power structures and dominant norms and practices at SPAC. After spending some time at SPAC, the first author came to understand that, despite the discursive organizational commitments and the many promotion events related to equality and diversity work, individuals belonging to a minority group of some sort often felt 'different' at SPAC due to the normative culture. This feeling was understood to be related to the embodied sense of diverging from the norm, for instance, due to race, ethnicity, or in terms of what was assumed to be an 'able' body. This is presumably partially due to the founding value of SPAC, established in the 1930's, which was to specifically strengthen the national culture of Sweden through granting equal access to quality cultural and art products to everyone in the country. However, in the increasingly diverse societal and organizational context, the promotion of diversity and inclusion therefore, remained a challenge and often led to tensions in the organization. This was evident during the interviews as individuals (from other cultural backgrounds, or of different races or skin colors) have expressed their opinions regarding diversity and inclusion very strongly. Such tensions intrigued the authors to further explore the relationship between norms and the feeling of 'different,' focusing on micro-level interpretations and expressions.

The concept of 'difference' is essential for this work. We do not assign our participants as 'others' based on demographic categories. Rather, focusing on the participants' perspectives, we attempted to identify the feeling of being different in their narratives. Although the differences can be understood as spanning across multiple intersections of gender, ethnicity, sexuality, religion and ableness, two groups of individuals stood out for voicing their difference in relation to the salient organizational norms: people of other ethnic backgrounds or (visible) racial characteristics that diverged from the perceived Swedish ethnic norm, and deaf people from the Theater of Sign Language. Among the former, many were Swedish citizens who had migrated with their parents in early childhood, or second-generation migrants

who had been born in Sweden. The latter group consisted mainly of deaf people from the Theater of Sign Language who strived to be treated as 'normal' and 'able.'

For this work, we analyzed interview data mainly from individuals who belonged to the two aforementioned groups as they had articulated identity bewilderment relating to the organizational norms. Most importantly, they expressed a very strong willingness to reach out to others and to change the existing situation. The participants—Sara, Mary, Annika, David, Alex, James, Anna and Christine—openly shared feelings of being 'different' in the organization due to their skin color, ethnic background or deafness. We present the information about our participants and the interview lengths in Table 1 below.

Sara worked at the Theater of Sign Language, an artistic unit where most employees were deaf people. As the head of the department, Sara persistently strived to make changes in the organization so that the members of her department would be treated as 'normal.' Mary, a woman of color was newly employed (in 2019) and had a great deal of responsibility in a non-artistic department of the organization. David, a member of the decision-making team in the theater department, had migrated from a central European country 10 years prior. Annika was a theater performer who had come to Sweden in her childhood from one of the Latin American countries. Alex, a dramaturg who felt very "lonely" both at SPAC and in the Swedish artistic community due to his non-Caucasian look. James was one of the members on the decision-making team in one of the dance departments. He was a white male in his 50 s and had come from a central European country. James' interview was chosen for this work because he emphasized his being 'different' from the norm by understanding for his 'foreignness,' his partner's different background and his understanding of what it meant to be 'different' in a Swedish cultural organization. Anna and Christine both had a Hispanic background and had joined and left SPAC for the same reason: the increasing feeling of being 'different.' For this work, we analyzed chosen participant's interview data by situating the interpretation of it in the ethnographic observations and the research fieldnotes.

Moreover, we would like to indicate that during the course of research, the first author's Asian-Swedish identity became important in her ethnographic attempts. She was often perceived by participants of different ethnic backgrounds as 'one of them' and quickly gained their trust. A mutual understanding of the feelings of being 'different' (from the Swedish cultural and ethnic norms) was thus often implicitly presumed in many interactions and during the interviews. This mutuality later became a basis for how the first author related to the experiences of other individuals who felt 'different' at SPAC as well. We recognize that this part of the research process and the ethnographic reflections

Table 1 Interview data and the interviewees' self-perceived differences

Pseudonyms	Position in SPAC	Length/times of interviews	Self-perceived differences
Sara	One of the artistic decision-makers in Theater of Sign Language	44'; 56'5''; 35'55''	Being a person of deafhood and regarded as 'disabled' at SPAC
Mary	Responsible for a large non-artistic department	41'6''; 49'29''	Being a non-Caucasian person and deviant from the majority of white, ethnic Swedish
Alex	One of the senior dramaturgs	48'39''; 9'8''	Being one of the few non-Caucasian persons who made to the senior, artistic positions
David	One of the artistic decision-makers at the Theater Department	43'36''; 28'20''	Being migrated from a central European country, speaking Swedish with a strong accent
Annika	Theater performer	55'47''	With an appearance that deviant from the majority ethnic Swedish actors and her Hispanic ethnic background
Anna	Administrator	33'43''; 64'59''	With an appearance that deviant from the majority ethnic Swedish actors and her Hispanic ethnic background
Christine	Producer	84'4''; 36'9''; 46'40''	With an appearance that deviant from the majority ethnic Swedish actors and her Hispanic ethnic background

resulting from it, was consistent to a relational, embodied approach this work is based upon.

The Writing Process

The second author was invited to join the present work during the first year of the ethnographic project, and was then informed by the initial interpretations made by the first author. Together, the authors developed a theoretical framework that centralized the relationship between feelings of being 'different,' vulnerability and 'other-oriented' caring by drawing on feminist ethics of care. The two authors contributed to the subsequent handling the data, the construction of the analysis, and the process of writing the paper equally.

Data Analysis

In the analysis, we assumed language to be the vehicle for understanding the participants' reflections of their lived experience (e.g., Schütz, 1964). Meanwhile, we situated the data analysis in the ethnographic observations and the understanding of the context of the organization, including its general approach to equality and diversity. Specifically, in the analytical process, we used a two-fold method of interpretive phenomenology (e.g., Ahmed, 2007; Aspers, 2009; Geertz, 1973) as the analytical approach. We paid specific attention to embodied and emotional accounts in the analysis, given its ethical importance within feminist care ethics (Held, 2006; Liedtka, 1996; Noddings, 2013). We then 'filtered' these experiences through our theoretical frame to further elaborate on how these expressions could be understood as a form of ethical agency as

'other-oriented' caring. This second-order interpretation has been accounted for in the findings section.

To arrive at the second-order conduct, we used the analytical framework (drawing on the relational concept of vulnerability and the notion of *caring with*) for coding. When examining the interview data, we separated participants' narratives regarding their demographic identity from the feeling of being 'different' in relation to the perceived organizational norms. In our interviews, none of the participants expressed negative feelings about belonging to any demographic categories, be it race, gender, religion or ethnicity. Instead, they were all content and proud of who they were. Therefore, the type of expressions we focused on analyzing in this work were those resulting from participants' feelings of being deviant from a perceived, dominant norm or bodily ideal in the organization.

Based on this, we identified a three-step process in which individuals' vulnerable experience transformed to initiatives for change. To do this, we first captured (in the coding process) participants' expressions that indicated a sense of deviance between the norm (such as a bodily ideal, ethnicity or appearance). Secondly, we captured responsive expressions that showed their concerns for others, such as moral sentiments of empathy and sympathy based on their own lived experiences (of being deviant from the norm). Thirdly, we examined how individuals acted upon the emotive expressions such as empathy and sympathy to forge relations with others and to articulate any initiatives or willingness to engage with equality work.

Research Ethics

In order to protect the identity of the organization and individuals, pseudonyms for the organization and the respondents have been used. As we are aware the difficulties in completely anonymizing one's identity in an organization where white ethnically Swedish people constitute the majority, we made attempts to blur the positions our participants occupied at SPAC as much as possible. The focus lays mainly on the participants' narratives about feeling 'different' and less on the type of work they were engaging with. Therefore, we used approximate descriptions of their positions in the organization without affecting the understanding of the data and analysis.

Findings

The following analysis centralizes the relationship between feelings of being 'different,' vulnerability and the development of sensibilities, practices and imaginaries of care. Although the sense of being 'different' was also associated with pride and being regarded as resourceful (for instance, being creative and able to offer a unique contribution to work), the participants continuously expressed a sense of vulnerability with regard to their 'difference' from the norms they perceived as being enforced upon them in the organization. This sense was often elaborated upon in relation to situations and experiences through which they were reminded of the salient demographic differences within the organization, which triggered reflections regarding their own role in the organization, as well as their responsibilities toward others. It is within this tension between the norm (e.g., the ethnic or bodily ideal) and the feeling of deviance and perceived marginalization, that we explore participants' experiences and the potential strengths of vulnerability. The observations revealed that, while such experiences gave rise to emotions such as frustration, despair and a sense of 'loneliness' and unfairness, amidst them, a trace of caring imagination (Hamington, 2004) emerged, fostering emotive resources such as empathy and sympathy to others. In the sub-sections below, we illustrate the three-step process in which our participants, in their narratives, negotiated their self-perceived feelings of being different through *voicing differences*, *forging connectedness* and, finally, *forming generative strength for change*.

Voicing Differences

In this research, when participants first started the interviews and described their lived experience, involvement, interpretation and comments about the organization's diversity pursuits, they often began with a very proud

introduction of themselves, and their identity related to their unique ethnic or cultural background. For example, the participants were all proud of their multi-linguistic skills; they believed they held a more comprehensive perspective in understanding artistic work; and they contributed to work with unique skills due to their differences. Yet, often when the interviews went deeper and further, the mode of 'being different' would alter. Participants then began to address the type of distress and bewilderment they had experienced as well as feelings of being 'managed' as one of the deviant 'others.'

Mary, who had migrated to Sweden about twenty years prior, expressed her feelings of being caught in between the discourses, strategies and policies and the actual organizational outcomes. The first author met Mary a short time after her recruitment. Mary was open about her 'loneliness' at SPAC as one of the few people of color, which, according to her, was the biggest motivation for "including more people who look like me in various processes at work." She then elaborated on this statement:

I speak several languages fluently, including Swedish. But I still stand out, for an obvious reason. Some people would make light jokes with me, reminding me of my 'different' ethnic identity and, particularly, the skin color. They would always turn to me for any comments about diversity ... Although I know they don't mean harm, most of the time, I don't always enjoy standing out. Do not get me wrong; they are not bad people but just lack sensitivity at times.

Following this, Mary continued to stress that her feeling of 'loneliness' had enabled her to connect with certain others in similar situations. One of those people was David, one of the artistic leaders in the theater department, who spoke Swedish with an accent as he migrated to Sweden some twenty years ago. About this 'connectedness,' Mary stated:

I feel easily connected to people of a 'foreign' background even though I do not regard myself or many others as foreign anymore. Somehow, we are still very different from others. But I realize that I work easier with David in the Management Team, for example. I think we understand each other based on our similar experience here, and this understanding is gold.

David confirmed Mary's perception of their mutual understanding, and he commented on his own experience of being different:

Well, I definitely understand what Mary meant. We work well together. You can hear my Swedish is not perfect. It is obvious that I am not Swedish. But my view of art from my own background contributes to my work here in the performing arts. Out in the asso-

ciations, my speech loses its authority and strength because of my accent, something I cannot hide.

SPAC was founded mainly for the purpose of educating people of Swedish culture and values in the 1930s, and the organization depends largely on volunteer associations across the nation for promoting and hosting the performing arts products. David indicated that his speech 'loses authority and strength' when he would speak to representatives from the volunteer associations where the traditional objective remains persistent even though multiculturalism and diversity has been broadly promoted centrally in the head organization.

Furthermore, echoing Mary, one of the senior dramaturgs, deliberately categorized himself as the object of the organization's equality strategy but expressed being dissatisfied with the result of the strategy. He used his experience to problematize SPAC's efforts in pursuing diversity and equality, explaining that "we are not doing enough to recruit more people like me." With this, Alex referred to his feeling of 'loneliness' in the senior artistic position, both at SPAC and in the Swedish art community in general:

You see, on paper, we are 'doing' all the right things. It is obvious that the goal is to include more people like me in all kinds of positions in the organization and to reach out to diverse groups of people in the country for them to become audiences of the performing arts. However, almost every day, I wonder what we have achieved. When you look around, judging by the appearance you see I am the only one from my ethnic group that has made it this far in an artistic position.

Alex spoke about his 'loneliness' with strong sentiments. He acknowledged the organizational ambition to achieve a diverse and inclusive culture, yet he felt alone and as an outsider from a norm which he did not perceive himself to belong.

As a theater performer, Annika thought her obvious non-ethnically Swedish appearance functioned as a double-edged sword:

I got opportunities to perform foreigners, most of the time. You see, I am obviously not a blond Swede. So, I am grateful for this. But, as an actor, I want to be recognized for my acting skills but not to be categorized by my look. I want to play Lady Macbeth, Madame Butterfly or maybe Juliet from Romeo and Juliet.

The type of inclusive culture Annika, Mary and Alex were hoping for was one in which they felt a part of, not as a target or someone to be 'managed' and 'integrated.' This was more explicitly articulated by Sara, the head of the Theater of Sign Language. Striving to be treated as 'normal' and

'able,' Sara claimed she represented the Deaf community with the statement below:

This may sound strange, we want people to pay more attention to us to understand the experience of deaf people, but we also want to be treated as 'normal people' who simply use another type of language, sign language. Being a very small part of this organization, we (deaf people) are constantly feeling isolated. In an organization of hearing people, we are constantly being reminded we are 'disabled people' as (hearing) people would not sit with us during lunch or come to our office for a coffee break.

Here, Sara was reflecting upon the implications and role of 'able bodies' in the organizational pursuits of equality, diversity and inclusion. She felt that the deaf people were not always given the possibility to enact, express and gain recognition as equals. Sara's perception of being 'different,' and the sense of vulnerability that came with it, was not grounded in being 'unable,' but in being categorized as 'disabled' in relation to the 'normal' bodies. Passionately, speaking for a collective group of 'we,' she refused to be viewed as an object of diversity work at SPAC and practices designated to integrate her and those like her. Drawing on her experiences of feeling 'unsettled', when associated with 'abnormality,' Sara promoted an openness to differences and possibilities to form alternative, more 'generous,' organizational relations that did not contribute to essentializing her or her colleagues working in the Theater of Sign Language.

The above quotes and similar expressions from many others with different ethnic backgrounds, visible 'deviances' from the ethnically Swedish appearance, or a strong (foreign) accent when speaking Swedish describe a state of vulnerability linking to a norm mainly emphasizing a particular culture or bodily ideal, to which our participants did not perceive themselves as belonging. Nevertheless, following the expressions about being different, participants continued to express moral sentiments toward others of similar backgrounds, traits and conditions, which laid a basis for *caring with others*.

Forging Connectedness Through Vulnerability

In this sub-section, we illustrate how participants turned the sense of vulnerability into a caring imagination about others; they then enabled moral sentiments such as empathy and sympathy for people both within and outside of their immediate experience of life (Hamington, 2004). Here, we understand empathy as the emotive resource with which our participants connected with others by assuming people had experienced similar obstacles to those they had. Empathy transcends distance; it is an instinctive projection of people's personal experience into an

“external body” (Hamington, 2004, p. 71). Empathy makes intersubjective experience possible as it allows people to express responsibility toward others and their experiences. Another major moral sentiment, sympathy, is similar to empathy, but is understood as directed toward “persons contiguous to us” more “than with persons remote from us” (Noddings, 1984, p. 144). Drawing on these notions, we found our participants acted upon these moral sentiments to address an imagined shared vulnerability with both their close colleagues and unknown others.

Both Alex and Mary conveyed caring imagination relating to their own vulnerable experience of being ‘different.’ They reached out to ‘similar others’ who they assumed were often excluded from the organization or the type of work they were doing. To stress this, Mary said:

I sense there is tension and even hostility between people, based on different views, different backgrounds regarding different things. I observed that people with ethnic backgrounds tend to leave this organization. They still do. I have suggested that the organization should take this matter seriously and investigate why ethnic people leave us. We need to learn from these cases.

Alex, being one of the few people of color in a senior artistic position, was not satisfied by his own successful career achievement. Rather, he questioned how the organization and even the entire industry managed to marginalize more people (who look like him) in the art and creative industry. Following his statement about being ‘lonely’ in the organization and the art industry, he challenged this with the quote below:

Does this mean that there are few people from my ethnic group that have the talent for this type of artistic work or is there something we are not doing correctly? They often say that there are few candidates out there, you know, who are black. But have they been given equal opportunities? I really think that only when we have more people look like me being included in the education system, in similar positions to mine can we begin to talk about diversity.

Here, we found that the ‘similar others’ Mary, Alex and many participants mentioned were either people they knew of or remote people ‘out there.’ Empathizing or sympathizing with their circumstances did not signal any asymmetrical relations; rather, a mutual connectedness emerged from the presumed vulnerable conditions.

Furthermore, by using pronouns such as ‘we’ and ‘us,’ our participants expressed emotional attachment and empathy to a particular group (they felt they belonged to) rather than a specific person. Yet, they also often blurred the boundaries of diversity categorizations and formed

a solidary unity including all minority members in their addressing of ‘others.’ For example, Sara was determined to pave a better road for the next generation to be seen and accepted as ‘normal’ and claimed that “‘we’ need to consider the conditions of ‘disabled people’ and to provide them with equal opportunities in life and work.” Here, Sara did not specify deafness as the particular condition that needed more attention. Similarly, Anna and Christine were of the same ethnic background. When they articulated moral sentiments to others, they used inclusive terms to stress an empathy to all type of ‘diverse’ others.

I see how my children are being bullied because they do not look exactly like Swedish kids. I think about it often when I am working here. With my job, I believe I am able to do something for these kids who are of different looks and backgrounds. – Anna
People like us are important resources. I hope the organization may see this and appreciate it. We contribute to the artistic process with our unique ‘eyes’ and perceptions. I hope we receive more appreciation for our differences. - Christine

The above quotes show that the participants expressed a unanimous feeling of responsibility for reaching out to and caring about the situations of both close and distant others. Following Hamington (2004) who note that care and imagination are closely allied concepts, and that embodied care requires a caring imagination, we understand the participants’ expressions of distress and pain linked to past experience as a way that they had concretized embodied knowledge about others. When individuals had acted upon their moral sentiments and enabled empathy and sympathy, they had been able to integrate embodied knowledge about others, and engender affective responses to them. We view this as a process in which the participants made ‘embodied connection’ with unknown others (Hamington, 2004). Here, although we do not account for ‘caring imagination’ as a realistic reflection of the experiences of all assumed others, we detected caring sentiments arising from the self-reflections open to possibilities for empathy for others that transcended specific diversities. This can be understood as a form of ‘ethical sensitivity’ (Borgerson, 2007) that connects people with similar experiences, and contributes to the cultivation of more caring relationships and practices.

Another intriguing pattern was that the participants rarely expressed intentions of assimilative behaviors or made efforts to achieve ‘sameness’ despite the struggle they claimed to have gone through. This shows that being ‘different’ is not an issue; rather, the treatment of those who are different is at the center of the discussion. The care and caring relations forged this way does not carry an intention of achieving normative ideal of commonality

built around a homogeneous group of people; rather, it emphasizes openness and requires recognition and tolerance for 'differences' that serve a diversity of experiences and interests among individuals (Tronto, 2013).

Furthermore, while *feeling with* others, our participants simultaneously assigned themselves the role of being a caregiver to others. Yet, we see little intention of reducing those who were perceived as others to a 'homogeneous entity.' Rather, with these expressions, the individuals at SPAC maintained an 'openness' to others by persistently acknowledging and recognizing the differences of other similar 'selves' (cf. Young, 1986). As such, there is rarely any emphasis on the power structure between the caregiver and the unknown care receiver. The caring relationality is naturally placed in a mutually equal position. Although we only examined the voices of the 'caregivers' we captured a nuance of aspiration of the 'co-becoming' between the caregiver and the care receiver. By relating to the unknown or known others, and expressing care for their wellbeing and future possibilities, we sense that the individuals intended to enhance opportunities as well as the wellbeing of others as they pursued equality, fairness, justice and wellbeing for themselves. We identify this as what Tronto (2013) describes as 'meaningful care' emerging from *caring with*, where caregiver relates to caregiver by viewing each other as equals and connecting with each other emotionally while seeking empowerment for each other.

Forming Agentic Strength for Change Through Care

In this section, we illustrate how participants narrated their motivations for developing change initiatives regarding equality and diversity work both inside and outside SPAC for future opportunities and growth for themselves and others by relating to embodied experience of vulnerability. Thus, we further explore the generative effect and agentic strength of the 'other-oriented,' affective caring tendency. More specifically, we interpret and illustrate how care ethics that emerge from a sense of being 'different' may contribute to a form of ethical agency grounded in compassion and the possibility to connect with others.

James, who was working on the management team in one of the dance departments, is an example of someone who argued for a more contextual approach to equality and inclusion work while continuously emphasizing his own role and responsibilities. In many interviews at SPAC around the topic of equality and diversity, ethnic Swedes or people who perceived themselves as belonging to a 'privileged majority group' often tried to present themselves as an 'insider' of the 'diverse' groups by indicating their closeness or connections with them. Typically, people would say "I don't discriminate against people with other cultural backgrounds—my husband is from another country, you see." James is a white

man in his 50 s and he is from a central European country. Yet, like many others, James began with an introduction of the 'indicators of vulnerability' of himself:

On the surface, I am this man of a particular age, occupying a relatively important position in a cultural organization. But my partner is a person of color... However, when I am perceived as the token of white male power, I feel I have to accept my role of tokenism. This is to highlight the existence of inequality in our industry and in society. I often tell myself that this is never a personal attack; it is just a critique of the system which is very much needed.

Here, James describes the basis for his own understanding of being 'different' by introducing his partner. Unlike the other participants, interestingly, James' regarded vulnerable experience rose from his awareness of being the 'token' for white and powerful men and the secondary experience of vulnerability (gained from the perspective of his partner). He used this vulnerability to try to hold a space for marginalized individuals addressing the asymmetry related to gender, ethnicity and race. We, therefore, see this as an ongoing, reflexive construction of ethical frames that individuals such as James engaged with to make changes. In this process, by exposing his vulnerable position as the 'token,' he enacted care *with*, instead of *for*, others as he does not take himself (or those like him) as the given point of reference. Ethical care emerged as the result of self-reflexivity in allocating oneself in a vulnerable place, and in turn, transformed into a source of inspiration and energy for change.

In a similar manner, Alex, the dramaturg, articulated a willingness to help others reach more advanced positions:

I am doing what I can to bring along people with other backgrounds. This is not only because I identify with them, but also for the sake of creative work. We need different views, experience and talents in this industry. And of course, I would love to see that more people who are like me can make it far in their career at SPAC and in Sweden.

When Alex mentioned 'others who are like me,' he pointed at himself, looked at the first author assuming a mutual understanding about skin color. In this quote, Alex willingly took on the responsibility for ensuring fair opportunities for others. He further justified this by emphasizing how diversity promotes creativity. Transcending a sense of being vulnerable, Alex sought means to promote actual changes.

Sara was equally passionate about her role as an inspiration to young people and children with hearing impairment. Her drive and passion came from concerns of being seen as 'deviant' in society, where the 'able' body without any 'variations' is taken as the norm.

I am seen as a role model for youngsters with similar backgrounds. As a deaf kid, I never thought I would work with the theater. Survival in society has been the primary task. I would like to inspire children to dare to participate in the type of work they are passionate about. What I need to do is to remove the prejudice about us from this organization. We are just like anyone else. We don't want to be seen as people with defects.

The generative effect of Sara's passion and persistent actions has been obvious. By the time this article was written, Sara's organization had changed its name to a new one without any indication of deafness or sign language. This change is presumably the result of Sara and her colleagues' persistent striving for being treated as 'normal' able people. Sara and her colleagues saw this change as "the first step toward more substantial changes." Sara can be seen to have shaped her sense of responsibility in a rather different way from, for example, Alex who strived for inclusion of difference through emphasizing advantages of diversity. Sara pursued a view of 'normality' for herself and fellow employees. These can be seen as two different ethical strategies, both grounded in vulnerable experiences in a norm-based society. In the end, these two approaches motivate the same outcome: a more inclusive organizational life that is not premised by a homogeneous cultural expression or workforce.

Our data also shows that individuals' sense of responsibility for making changes goes beyond organizational borders. Anna, dissatisfied about her career situation in the department, expressed enthusiasm for doing things for people with similar backgrounds to herself and for children from migrant families. Together with Christine, she applied for a scholarship to travel to their home country to research female artists' resistance and struggles in a masculine society. With this project, they turned the caring sentiments into actions which addressed an alternative approach to culture and inclusion.

This project is not about bringing in some exotic stories about Chilean women and artists that are out there. We would like to bring their stories to Sweden as one aspect of people's lives so that Swedish people understand that the struggle for equality takes different forms in different places. We want their stories to be part of the Swedish cultural discussion.

Anna also stressed that her passion for working with dance projects for young people derived from her concern for her own children and those from families of different cultural backgrounds:

It is my passion to provide opportunities to children who are like my own, with dark hair and different looks from the Swedish kids, to participate in dance

activities. My kids asked me once why they could not be blond like other Swedish kids. They will always be identified as being different from the Swedish kids. But at least they should have equal opportunities in life.

Annika was very explicit about her willingness to engage with including more Latin American ethnic people on the Swedish theater stage while being freed from the constraint of only performing 'foreigners' on stage. Brushing her curly long dark hair with her fingers with a confident smile on her face, she stated:

I know this is not an easy task, and it seems at times self-conflicting. I mean, I want to be recognized for my differences but still be treated equal to the white Swedish majority. It should be possible to really include other cultures as part of its own, and that could benefit many people who are like myself and my friends with other cultural roots.

Today, Annika works actively both promoting performing arts from the country of her cultural roots and striving for equal opportunities in performing arts with her ethnically Swedish peers.

While focusing on analyzing individuals' narratives with descriptions of willingness and initiatives in engaging with diversity work, we detected a notable pattern regarding the transformation from willingness—the drive and initiatives—to the descriptions of actions contributing to developing actual changes. Individuals drew from their own experiences of being 'different' to actively generate strategies and initiatives centered in the possible needs and future growth of (often unknown) others in a reciprocal manner. These actions, thereby, had a generative effect with regard to challenging the status quo and supporting the development of more just and equal organizational relations.

Concluding Discussion

In this paper, we examine the ethical issues residing in diversity management, emphasizing a homogeneous organizational culture, norms and bodily ideals. Instead of scrutinizing how individuals become marginalized by, or strategically position themselves in relation to, diversity discourses and practice (cf. Zanoni & Janssens, 2007; Zanoni et al., 2017), our work explores the agentic strength residing in individuals' feelings of being assigned to categories such as 'foreign,' 'unable,' 'abnormal' or 'migrant' through diversity management. We have situated this sense of 'difference' in relation to the notion of vulnerability, and have employed feminist care ethics (Noddings, 2013; Tronto, 1993, 2013), to centralize how our participants voiced feelings of being 'different' and forged embodied knowledge about unknown

or known others through caring imagination, which enabled emotive resources such as empathy and sympathy and cultivated an 'other-oriented' ethical agency.

Our empirical analysis indicates that being in a minority group and feeling vulnerable does not deprive one's ability to care *with* others. On the contrary, vulnerability served as the basis for intersubjective relations and caring imagination about others, and can thus be understood as a site from which ethical relations emerged (also Hamington, 2004; McKenzie et al., 2014). Therefore, we assert that individuals draw on their 'difference' when negotiating and developing relations and practices that concern others, instead of emphasizing how it is used in a self-oriented manner (cf. Zanoni et al., 2017). We further argue that individuals who are assigned as 'others,' within an organizational culture that emphasizes white, male, abled bodies, develop 'other-oriented' ethical sensibilities and practices through embodied and affective knowledge of both known and unknown others. On this note, we highlight the generative possibilities residing in feelings of being 'different,' which were seen in this study as contributing to fostering organizational changes premised by interconnectivity, reciprocity and respect.

Our findings also illustrate the emergence of an alternative, intersubjective dynamic regarding the notion of assimilation and 'sameness' (e.g., Holck, 2016; Risberg & Söderberg, 2008). Contrary to the predicted inclination toward reduced differences grounded in the organizational promotion of homogeneity, individuals who considered themselves as being 'different' at SPAC openly affirmed their alterity as a form of 'other-oriented' strength. We see this as an intriguing finding that adds dynamics to understanding the paradox of being 'different' in an organizational setting, which further marks the importance of centralizing marginalized voices when discussing the emergence and potential of transformative caring relations (Phillips & Williat, 2020).

Although this study captures a pattern of the narrated *felt* responsibility for initiatives of changes articulated by the individuals who identified as 'different,' we detect that such 'responsibility' did not affirm asymmetrical power relations between the caregiver and the care receiver. Rather, emphasis was placed on 'bringing others along,' and the concern of 'leaving someone behind' was salient. Thus, instead of claiming an authoritarian position, individuals who expressed caring intentions sought to 'co-become' with the care receivers building upon empathetic emotions and affective connectedness. This further aligns with Tronto's (2013) emphasis on the importance for *caring with* to align with broader commitments to justice, equality and freedom for it to possibly challenge societal, institutional or organizational structures of demarcation. Our work elaborates on this organizationally, and in relation to diversity management, by demonstrating the strengths of corporeal connectedness that emerged from the enforced sense of being 'different' from

the norm. Here, we argue that reciprocity is essential for the formation of such personal, yet 'other-oriented,' ethical agency in organizations. Future studies could direct further attention toward the changes unfolding from such a sense of agency, as well as the possible tensions between expressions of individuality and relationality within the development of caring ethical relations.

In summary, our findings bring to the fore the possibilities of 'other-oriented' care derived from reciprocal relations, and address the noted ethical oversight of embodied relationality and care in organizational research (Gotsis & Kortezi, 2012; Pullen & Rhodes, 2014, 2015a, 2015b; Tyler, 2019). We contend that caring practices derived from embodied experiences connect bodies of various colors, forms, and capabilities, and maintain potentials in developing a more equal and inclusive culture in organizations. This implies that individuals could become sensitized to 'other-oriented' caring, through it would be dependent on cultivating vulnerability and embodied openness toward others (e.g., Phillips & Williat, 2020). We see this micro-level embodied connectedness as a further challenge to the continuous centralization of rationality, policies or regulations as ground for ethical practices in organizations (Hamington & Sander-Staudt, 2011; Hancock, 2008; Pullen & Rhodes, 2015a, 2015b).

Although our analysis primarily focuses on individuals' lived experiences and perceptions, we are aware that it is important to not lose sight of the organizational environment in which these individuals were embedded. An open and embracing culture (in terms of different insights, opinions and experiences) facilitates the possible 'reach' (Liedtka, 1996) within an organization, which, in turn, gives space for and nurtures agentic strengths emerging from the feeling of being 'different.' The organization, SPAC, held a genuine intention of establishing a diverse and inclusive culture, and improving the state of equality on, in front of and behind the stage. Although falling short in many aspects in practice, the organization provided a relatively open environment for discussion around issues and tensions that emerged. As a result, our participants were able to be open and straightforward while expressing their feelings of being 'different.' We see this as another pre-condition for effective individuals' reflexivity in seeking connection with others in an organizational context. With this, we encourage organizations to focus on allowing more openness and 'reach,' as well as to be attentive to different voices and to identify and utilize the strengths of the 'voices of difference.'

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