



# The Duality of an Atypical Leader in Diversity Management: The Legitimization and Delegitimization of Diversity Beliefs in Organizations

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**An atypical leader is often celebrated as an individual who is likely to support workforce diversity in organizations. Yet the verity of the assumption that an atypical leader will invariably promote workforce diversity remains underexplored. In this paper, we question this assumption and demonstrate the dualities of an atypical leader in legitimizing and delegitimizing workforce diversity. We define and examine the concept of atypicality among leaders, in terms of how they emerge, who they are (dispositions), what they say (discourses) and what they do (performative acts). We introduce a conceptual framework that maps out the emergence and constitution of an atypical leader, as well as their impact on diversity management within an organization. Our analysis incorporates the concept of habitus (class-specific and reflexive), in order to reveal the dualities of an atypical leader which determine the management of diversity within an organization and cause continuity and change in diversity beliefs.**

## Introduction

Demographic diversity in the boardroom is a much desired social project (Glass and Cook 2018; Hafsi and Turgut 2013; Torchia *et al.* 2011), the success of which remains patchy and partial across a large number of countries and organizations (Azmat and Rentschler 2017; Kakabadse *et al.* 2015; Sayce and Özbilgin 2014; Terjesen *et al.* 2009). Atypicality among leaders is often viewed as a sign of healthy levels of workforce diversity and workplace democracy (Alter 2017). As the project of diversity has gained momentum more recently (Baehr and Gordon 2017), we should now expect to see more opportunities for individuals from atypical backgrounds to ascend to leadership positions. However, the majority of corporate leaders still come from the dominant group of white heterosexual able-bodied men from elite socio-economic backgrounds (Danieli and Wheeler 2006; Dobbin and Kalev 2016; Lumby 2006).

An atypical leader is an individual who is ‘rarely associated with leadership positions’ (Alter 2017, p. 88), originating from non-privileged, non-dominant, under-represented, disadvantaged or unusual demographic backgrounds (e.g. women, ethnic-minority and LGBT+ individuals, and individuals from lower socio-economic backgrounds). Ideally, an atypical leader occupies a privileged position, being simultaneously an ‘insider’, in terms of influencing followers and accessing the core power structure of an organization, and an ‘outsider’, in terms of not fitting the dominant group and culture (Alter 2017). This outsider and insider dynamic in terms of atypicality is more complex than is currently theorized. As a form of otherness, it empowers an atypical leader to be ‘an innovator from the margins’ – an innovator with a unique perspective on organizational reality, who introduces novelty by breaking away from the conventions of the prevailing group (Alter 2018). However, this description neither

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fully interrogates the mechanisms that bring an atypical leader to power, nor explicitly addresses the impact of an atypical leader on diversity. This view also runs the risk of homogenizing atypical leaders, leaving unquestioned their intentions, affordances, actions and impact on diversity beliefs.

In this paper we aim to address the impact of an atypical leader on diversity within organizations, illustrating our arguments with a conceptual framework that explains the emergence of an atypical leader and their role in diversity management. We initially analyse ‘the emergence’ (Lisak and Erez 2015) of an atypical leader, in the face of cognitive, normative and institutional barriers that construct discriminatory status beliefs about individuals from atypical backgrounds (Ridgeway 2011). The rise of an atypical leader should not be considered as an exception within an organization that is truly committed to equality, diversity and inclusion. Yet the emergence of an atypical leader is challenging to those organizations where diversity practices are evidently missing (Bebington and Özbilgin 2013).

We clarify, next, what constitutes an atypical leader, drawing on Bourdieu (1984, 1993) to analyse their dispositions (who they are) and discourses (what they say); and then on Butler (1993) to shed light on their performative acts (what they do). The focal point of the analysis is the cognition and behaviour of an atypical leader as a result of their habitus, which is shaped by their social position. This, in turn, is caused by their demographic background (gender, class, race, religion) and access to capital resources (Bourdieu 1993). In our analysis, we take into account the possibility that an atypical leader can indirectly delegitimize diversity, either due to the tenacity of normative and structural barriers constructed by the dominant group to preserve the status quo; or through the actions, inactions and behaviours of that atypical leader in relation to diversity management. The habitus of an atypical leader appears to determine their role in legitimizing and/or delegitimizing diversity beliefs. We argue that if an atypical leader operates based on class-specific habitus (Hartmann 2000), then they are more likely to comply with dominant norms that reproduce precarity and inequality, eventually delegitimizing diversity beliefs. In contrast, when an atypical leader operates based on reflexive habitus, a process of thoughtful and naturalized transformation of the self and the circumstances (Sweetman 2003), they are more likely to seek diversity gains.

Our conceptual framework enhances our understanding of an atypical leader, by analysing their

impact on diversity beliefs from the viewpoint of duality, according to which ‘stability and change are fundamentally interdependent – contradictory but also mutually enabling’ (Farjoun 2010, p. 202). A duality view is important because the insider/outsider position of an atypical leader may lead to diversity-driven transformation. For instance, an atypical leader can explore complementarities by bringing to an organization skills and values, such as empathy, resilience, openness and inclusiveness (Özbilgin 2019), acquired as a result of their experience of the margin. However, diversity gains do not always take place in a linear fashion, but sometimes through processes of negotiation and reconciliation between the atypical leader and the dominant group within an organization (Kirton *et al.* 2007). A duality view exposes the contradictions that exist in organizations which select an atypical leader but subjugate them to dominant norms, precarity and exclusion (Garcia *et al.* 2009; Ryan and Haslam 2005; Yoder 1991). A duality view also enables us to identify and criticize the complex and often controversial behaviour of an atypical leader, such as their choice to support and legitimize one aspect of diversity (e.g. gender) while dismissing and delegitimizing another (e.g. social class).

The existence of an atypical leader alone does not guarantee diversity-driven transformation within organizations. As atypicality in leadership positions may not always have the desired effect, in terms of creating a more inclusive work environment, we need to critically analyse the dispositions, discourses and performative acts of an atypical leader, distinguishing those which legitimize diversity beliefs from those which may put diversity beliefs at risk. Figure 1 represents our conceptual framework and the flow of our paper, depicting the social construction of an atypical leader in terms of their emergence, constitution and dualities associated with the legitimization and delegitimization of diversity beliefs in organizations.

## Defining an atypical leader within the context of diversity management

Defining an atypical leader as inclusive, adventurous, trustworthy, powerful and ingenious (Alter 2017) does not encapsulate the struggles, compromises and failures experienced by an atypical leader within an organization. It should initially be noted that the term ‘atypical leader’ does not refer to a universal and unified category. Instead, individuals from marginalized

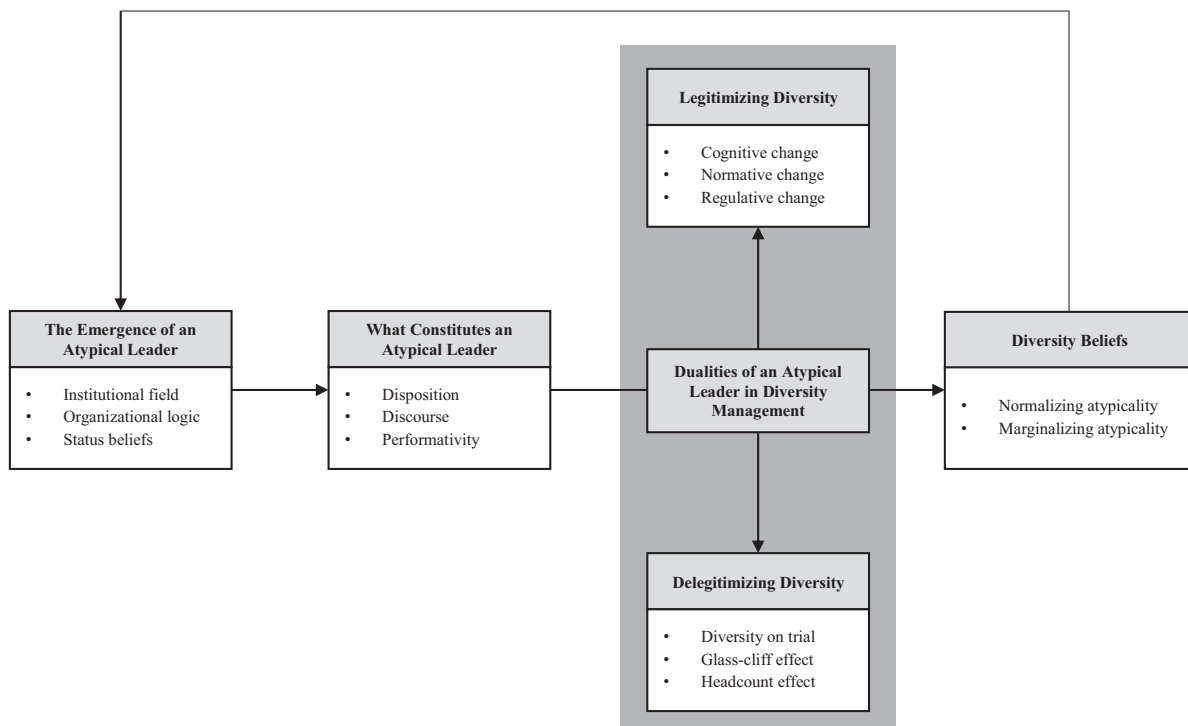


Figure 1. The social construction of an atypical leader and of diversity beliefs

Source: The authors.

backgrounds possess varying degrees of atypicality based on a unique blend of status beliefs about their social identities (e.g. gender, class, race, religion). Not all atypical leaders are equally disadvantaged, as some of them experience inequalities due to a combination of demographic factors, a phenomenon known as ‘intersectionality’ (Carrim and Nkomo 2016; Özbilgin *et al.* 2011), while others may have lesser degrees of atypicality.

We also distinguish between a typical, an atypical and a prototypical leader. A typical leader is commonly drawn from socio-economic elites in Western societies that privilege white, male, middle-class and well-educated individuals (Nkomo and Al Ariss 2014; Rosette *et al.* 2008). Despite the pledges of many organizations to diversity, equality and inclusion, the upper echelons of the largest US corporations listed in the Fortune 500 are still occupied by privileged white male leaders (Cook and Glass 2015; Glass and Cook 2018). In 2018, for example, there were ‘just 3 black CEOs running Fortune 500 companies, down from a height of 8 three years ago. The number of women serving as CEOs was down to 24 as of May [2018], a 25% drop since June 2017’ (Green *et al.* 2018, n.p.).

A prototypical leader is a leader who emerges from a homophilic group of followers that share similar demographic characteristics or an ideology (Brodbeck *et al.* 2000; Giessner *et al.* 2013; Steffens *et al.* 2013). Prototypicality is manifested in the discourses of followers who applaud their leader for ‘being one of us’, ‘doing it for us’, ‘crafting a sense of us’ and ‘embedding a sense of us’ (Steffens *et al.* 2013). A prototypical leader may emerge from a migrant community, a sub-culture or a minority group that maintains a strong identity which may be sought after and accepted by the dominant culture in society (Bourhis *et al.* 1997). The black entrepreneur Edward G. Gardner is an example of a prototypical business leader, the pioneering co-founder of the cosmetic products manufacturer Soft Sheen Products, and an active supporter of, and inspiration for, the black community in Chicago (Ingham and Feldman 1994).

In contrast, an atypical leader comes from a more unusual background and they do not have the unwavering support of an identity network of followers (see Table 1). However, an atypical leader is not necessarily a minority leader: for example, the white elite is a minority in South Africa but does not represent the oppressed (Nkomo 2011). Atypicality can have

Table 1. Definitions of typical, prototypical and atypical leaders

	Definition	Description	Examples in the literature
Typical leader	A leader from a socio-demographic background that is commonly represented in leadership positions	A white, male, able-bodied, heterosexual, Christian, older leader in the Western context	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• White male leaders (Glass and Cook 2018)</li> <li>• White privilege in the USA (Nkomo and Al Ariss 2014)</li> <li>• Racial bias in leader categorization (Rosette <i>et al.</i> 2008)</li> </ul>
Prototypical leader	A leader who emerges from a homophilic group of followers who share similar demographic characteristics or ideology	A populist leader whose discourses appeal to particular sub-cultures	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Cross-cultural leader prototypes (Brodbeck <i>et al.</i> 2000)</li> <li>• Leader-group prototypicality (Giessner <i>et al.</i> 2013)</li> <li>• Leader prototypicality (Steffens <i>et al.</i> 2013)</li> </ul>
Atypical leader	A leader from a non-privileged, non-dominant, unusual, disadvantaged, under-represented and/or disenfranchised background	A female, black/minority-ethnic, LGBT+, non-Christian, young leader in the Western context	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Atypical bosses (Alter 2017)</li> <li>• Tempered radicals (Meyerson and Scully 1995)</li> <li>• LGBT+ leaders (Özbilgin 2019)</li> </ul>

Source: The authors.

a positive effect on diversity only when it instigates inclusive and collective practices (Chin 2010; Eagly and Chin 2010; Fletcher 2004; Özbilgin 2019). Indra Nooyi, the Indian-born former CEO of PepsiCo, Cathy Engelbert, the current CEO of Deloitte and the first female CEO of a Big Four firm in the USA, and Tim Cook, the current CEO of Apple and the first openly gay CEO on the Fortune 500 list, are some examples of an atypical leader. What these leaders have in common is their commitment to the values of inclusivity, accountability and being caring. These values present a sharp contrast to manifestations of atypicality appropriated by a self-declared atypical leader or demagogue, often from the ranks of the extreme right, who uses the rhetoric of marginalization to gain power (Rooyackers and Verkuyten 2012). This last note serves as a useful reminder that atypicality is not necessarily associated with diversity-driven change, and that the values advocated by an atypical leader should be placed under scrutiny.

Within the context of diversity, a typical leader, who is entrenched in the status quo, may lack the motivation to support diversity-led transformations, while an atypical leader, as an innovator from the margins, may risk supporting diversity interventions, despite their lack of legitimacy (Bebington and Özbilgin 2013; Garud *et al.* 2007). As such, an atypical leader may act as a ‘tempered radical’, seeking ‘advancement within mainstream organisations and professions’ (Meyerson and Scully 1995, p. 586), but also wanting to change them. Like a tempered radical,

an atypical leader may ‘strongly believe in eradicating gender, race, class and other social injustices’, struggling to ‘act in ways that are appropriate professionally, but . . . also “authentic” personally and politically’ (Meyerson and Scully 1995, p. 586). It is therefore important to scrutinize the conditions under which an atypical leader rises to power.

## The emergence of an atypical leader

Existing research into diversity among leaders suggests that acceptance of atypicality varies across national, industrial and organizational contexts (e.g. Lisak *et al.* 2016; Peretz *et al.* 2015), while the likelihood of the emergence of an atypical leader seems to rely on status beliefs about individuals from particular atypical backgrounds (Ridgeway 2011). In order to explain the emergence of an atypical leader, we need to clarify why certain institutional fields and organizations are more likely to select an atypical leader than others.

### *Institutional field*

An institutional field includes ‘a set of organisational populations and the relations that embed members of these populations into a social system or network with a purpose’ (Barley 2010, p. 780). The role of an institutional field is to maintain and develop the rules, norms, processes, structures and practices that

grant legitimacy, status and professional identity to organizations and individuals (Clemens and Cook 1999; Lounsbury 2002; Oakes *et al.* 1998; Scott, 2008). Legitimacy is defined as ‘a generalised perception or assumption that the actions of an entity are desirable, proper, or appropriate within some socially constructed system of norms, values, beliefs, and definitions’ (Suchman 1995, p. 574). Attitudes to, and perceptions of, atypicality vary across institutional fields, which explains why an atypical leader may have more opportunities in certain institutional fields, such as the artistic field in the UK (McRobbie 2016), which has more female leaders and leaders from unprivileged backgrounds, compared to the field of politics which is male-dominated (Özbilgin *et al.* 2016). Inequalities have institutional origins which can be traced in the formation of institutional fields, especially when power structures and control mechanisms are designed and controlled by privileged groups in order to ensure their dominance and to reinforce perceptions about their high status and authority (Ridgeway 2014).

The unearned privileges of dominant groups are often subject to opposition and pressure by social movements that advocate for institutional change. The Civil Rights Movement in the USA, for instance, campaigned for desegregation and equal rights between 1955 and 1965 (Hargrave and Van de Ven 2006). Over a period of time, this created pathways for atypical individuals to access leadership positions (Thomas and Gabarro 1999). More broadly, macro-level changes such as globalization, post-colonialism, neo-liberalism and cosmopolitanism have accelerated processes of cultural exchange and hybridity (Burke 2009; Nkomo 2011), shaping a rapidly changing environment in which products and people flow across national boundaries with various effects: creating challenges for organizations in managing a diverse workforce; identifying, promoting and developing global leaders so that they can coordinate multicultural teams (Lisak *et al.* 2016); and resolving tensions between diverse cultures (Baehr and Gordon 2017).

Perceptions of atypicality emerge between global ideals that celebrate co-existence and parity, and local practices, norms and regulations that exist within a national context. However, institutionalized practices towards diversity are mainly local. For instance, Norway has created and enforced a gender representation law that requires ‘public limited companies’ boards to have at least 40% representation of each sex by 2008’ (Seierstad and Opsahl 2011, p. 44). Even

in more diverse and multi-ethnic societies, policies and norms towards the integration of difference may vary (Bourhis *et al.* 1997). For instance, Canada follows policies which revolve around multiculturalism, aiming to integrate diverse cultures while maintaining their identities within a cultural mosaic. This contrasts with the USA, which assimilates diverse cultures into a ‘melting pot’, with the aim of constructing a unified American identity (Berry and Sam 2013). The meaning and experience of atypicality differs across contexts, and these variations in turn account for the idiosyncratic ways in which an atypical leader can emerge within an organization.

### *The organizational logic of diversity*

The decision to select an atypical individual as a leader is made in an organization which is embedded within an institutional, national and industrial context. As current research suggests (Baehr and Gordon 2017), organizations are now more likely to support diversity, and also more likely, therefore, to give opportunities to atypical individuals. Nevertheless, the ways in which organizations practise diversity are contested, varying between two organizational logics of diversity. On the one hand, an organization can deprive an atypical individual of the opportunity to achieve a leadership position, when they only support diversity discursively. On the other hand, an organization can create an environment which is more suitable for the emergence of an atypical leader, when diversity discourses are accompanied by inclusive practices.

A strand of literature in diversity management identifies a divergence between the rhetoric of diversity and ‘doing diversity’ in organizations (Baehr and Gordon 2017; Thomas and Gabarro 1999). Tokenism is a typical case in which the practice of diversity includes perfunctory or symbolic efforts which do not trigger normative and structural transformation within organizations (Yoder 1991). Bruna *et al.* (2017) further criticize the rhetoric of diversity as often only comprising marketing activities that aim to portray firms as champions of diversity, when these activities in fact represent illusory or superficial initiatives. In a similar vein, drawing on her study of three US corporations, Marques (2010) claims that organizations are keen to post diversity statements online and collect diversity-based awards without truly providing a supportive and inclusive environment. These organizations may acknowledge the importance of diversity practices, but fail ‘to consider how managers



translate their understandings into specific diversity activities in practice' (O'Leary and Sandberg 2017, p. 513).

In contrast, the logic of practising diversity is expected to have a positive effect on the emergence of an atypical leader. A prerequisite for this logic is the adoption of an inclusive culture (Gotsis and Grimani 2016) and the management of tension, conflict or mistrust between individuals who belong to marginalized groups and those who belong to dominant groups (Baehr and Gordon 2017). Recent research suggests that female (Glass and Cook 2018) and ethnic-minority (Cook and Glass 2015) CEOs within the largest US Fortune 500 companies can have a positive impact on business practices and diversity initiatives in comparison with homophilic boards. In addition, gender-diverse boards 'are more likely than other firms to offer LGBT-friendly policies' (Cook and Glass 2016, p. 1431), which can in turn attract talented atypical individuals who value a culture of inclusiveness within an organization (Özbilgin 2019).

However, diversity in the boardroom does not guarantee the success of diversity initiatives on its own, and is more effective when managers engage in 'solving the problem, increase their on-the-job contact with female and minority workers, and promote social accountability – the desire to look fair-minded' (Dobbin and Kalev 2016, p. 55). Organizations truly committed to diversity should invest in practices such as 'targeted college recruitment, mentoring programs, self-managed teams, and task forces [which] have boosted diversity in businesses' (Dobbin and Kalev 2016, p. 4). More broadly, organizations which are committed to diversity practices can enjoy benefits in terms of: organizational performance (Özbilgin *et al.* 2014a, 2014b, 2016); creativity and competitive advantage (Bassett-Jones 2005); job satisfaction and work-group performance (Pitts 2009); and reductions in employee absenteeism and turnover (Peretz *et al.* 2015).

### *Status beliefs*

Key to the emergence of any atypical leader are the status beliefs held about them that 'associate greater status and general competence with people in one social category than another, while granting those in each category some specialised skills' (Ridgeway 2011, p. 60). As illustrated in the work of Reskin and Roos (2009) on gender queues and job queues, status beliefs that tend to value male leaders more

than female ones, together with the greater likelihood of male leaders occupying positions of higher status, result in competitions which are unattainable and too risky for women or unprivileged minorities. However, as Özbilgin and Healy (2004) demonstrate, in a study of female academics in Turkey, the existence of transparent rules and regulations that set performance standards can dissipate the effects of gender and job queues.

Status beliefs include social categories, such as gender, sexual orientation, religion and race. For instance, the white male employee or leader in the USA is 'raceless' and is not classified within groups like the Asian, Latino or Black minorities. White privilege remains unidentified and implicit without a vocabulary with which to criticize it (Nkomo and Al Ariss 2014). Status beliefs about unprivileged minorities reinforce the construction of stereotypes about them. In addition, minorities should not be treated as a single category, as, in many cases, status beliefs within a cultural context may form a racial hierarchy. Bell *et al.* (2014, pp. 294–295) argue that Asians in the USA, being below whites in the racial hierarchy, but above Latinos and blacks, are 'often stereotyped as "model minorities", perceived as respecting authority, valuing collectivist ideals, being emotionally self-controlled and being dedicated to educational achievement'.

As a consequence, an atypical leader, unlike a typical one, becomes visible and salient within their organizational and institutional context. Therefore, the emergence of an atypical leader requires justification through diversity discourses (Tatli *et al.* 2012). That emergence will depend on both the institutional context and the logic with which an organization practises diversity. The emergence, acceptance and longevity of any atypical leader depend on their status, both in the minds of their followers within an organization and in the minds of people in society as a whole. An atypical leader is conceptualized as innovating from the margin, and the concept of status beliefs is particularly useful in understanding the margin as the product of socially constructed and context-specific discriminatory perceptions in people's minds. Eventually, the margin seems to shape the experiences of each atypical individual in unique ways according to their degrees of atypicality; as a result, the ways in which an atypical leader overcomes barriers to innovate, as they advocate for the removal of discriminatory status beliefs, are also expected to be idiosyncratic.

Table 2. Bourdieu's forms of capital and capital resources possessed by an atypical leader

Bourdieu's forms of capital	Examples of capital resources possessed by an atypical leader
<p><b>Cultural capital</b></p> <p>An individual's knowledge, education and 'appreciation for or competence in deciphering cultural relations and cultural artefacts' (Bourdieu 1993, p. 7)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Elite education (Tobias Neely 2018)</li> <li>• Manners (Ridgeway 2014)</li> <li>• Tastes in art (Ridgeway 2014)</li> </ul>
<p><b>Symbolic capital</b></p> <p>An individual's accumulated prestige, reputation, celebrity, consecration, recognition or honour (Bourdieu 1993)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Native accent (de Souza <i>et al.</i> 2016)</li> <li>• Racial hierarchy (Bell <i>et al.</i> 2014)</li> <li>• Social origin (Maclean <i>et al.</i> 2014)</li> <li>• Sophisticated speech (Ridgeway 2014)</li> </ul>
<p><b>Social capital</b></p> <p>An individual's access to actual and potential resources that accrue by possessing a durable network of institutionalized relationships of mutual acquaintance and recognition (Bourdieu 1986)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Educational socialization (Maclean <i>et al.</i> 2014)</li> <li>• Access to professional networks (Tobias Neely 2018)</li> <li>• Access to expatriate networks (Berry and Bell 2012)</li> </ul>
<p><b>Economic capital</b></p> <p>An individual's command and possession of economic resources, such as assets, property and money (Bourdieu 1986)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Economic resources (Friedman <i>et al.</i> 2015)</li> <li>• Inherited (family) capital (Naudet <i>et al.</i> 2018)</li> </ul>

Source: The authors.

## What constitutes an atypical leader

In what follows, we analyse the dispositional (who they are), discursive (what they say) and performative (what they do) components that constitute an atypical leader. In doing so, we also identify the opportunities and challenges for any atypical leader, by stressing the conditions under which their practices might promote or prevent the creation of an inclusive and caring working environment.

### *The disposition of an atypical leader*

Leadership positions are essentially positions of power and authority (Robinson and Kerr 2009; Tatli 2017). It is therefore crucial to scrutinize the pathways to power of an atypical leader from the viewpoint of their social position. According to Bourdieu (1993), power inequalities and social hierarchies exist because economic, symbolic, cultural and social forms of capital are unequally distributed in society (see Table 2). This unequal distribution of capital resources maintains differences between social classes and class fractions, which are also manifested in 'class-based manners and lifestyle', as elites 'signal their status superiority through sophisticated speech, clothing, and tastes in art' (Ridgeway 2014, p. 4; emphasizing Bourdieu 1984). For instance, an atypical leader may combine high status and a minority background, as in the cases of minority-ethnic elites (Al Ariss *et al.* 2012) or expatriate executives who have a higher status than immigrant workers, due to their higher level of education and their accumula-

tion of cultural, and often symbolic and social, capital (Berry and Bell 2012).

Less privileged individuals often face social barriers to leadership positions. For instance, Wall Street firms, and the financial sector in general, can constitute a particularly hostile field for an atypical leader, due to the patrimonial and masculine culture that limits the ability of unprivileged minorities to access resources and positions of leadership (Tobias Neely 2018). More specifically, 'Wall Street firms recruit heavily from Ivy League . . . favouring students from upper-class or upper middle-class backgrounds' (Tobias Neely 2018, p. 369), which illustrates the importance of elite education (cultural capital) and the social hierarchy (symbolic capital), respectively. The lack of social capital puts unprivileged minorities in a disadvantaged position: they struggle to create professional networks which would provide them with resources, such as mentorship and professional development, and would allow them to move to positions with higher status and pay (Tobias Neely 2018).

The importance of capital resources may also vary across countries and institutional fields. In France, the socio-economic elite relies on educational pedigree to secure positions of leadership (Hartmann 2000; Maclean *et al.* 2014), while in India, elite domination derives from inherited capital (Naudet *et al.* 2018). In the UK, social mobility, which would allow individuals from lower social classes to occupy positions of power, is possible in some professions, such as the IT sector, but not in others, like law, medicine and finance (Friedman *et al.* 2015). However, the IT, software and computer services sectors in the UK are

still dominated by white male leaders, demonstrating that the social mobility which exists in these institutional fields may not produce more opportunities for the emergence of female, ethnic minority or LGBT+ leaders.

The social position of an atypical leader shapes their habitus, including their cognition, emotions and embodied behaviour within a social space (Bourdieu 1990). Bourdieu (1990, p. 76) defines 'habitus' as 'a socially constructed system of cognitive and motivating structures' composed of an objective disposition and a subjective selection that causes reproduction or change. As Robinson and Kerr (2009, p. 881, emphasizing Bourdieu, 1990, p. 117) explain: 'the capital an individual possesses partly defines how well they are accepted and integrated into a particular field and how they are able to position themselves within it. Thus an agent whose habitus is perfectly adapted to the field possesses a *sens pratique*, defined as a "feel for the game", to the extent that their habitus is "invisible" to themselves'.

Even if some aspects of the social identity of an atypical leader may be identified with the elite (e.g. elite education), their habitus can hardly be invisible, as other aspects of their identity will be salient (e.g. foreign accent). Class origins and class-specific habitus (Hartmann 2000) may influence the cognition, behaviour and motivation of an atypical leader, who may submit to the 'rules of the game' as determined by the managerial ideology of male domination that prioritizes profitability, patrimonialism and competition. Operating according to class-specific habitus, an atypical leader may succumb to what Bourdieu (1993) defines as *illusio*, recognizing that an anticipated stake or individual benefit takes priority over collectivism and equality in the workplace (Dillabough 2004). This is a situation of misrecognition, as an elite atypical leader may suppress a salient aspect of their identity, complying with dominant norms while anticipating acceptance from the dominant group. Misrecognition is broader in society, as less privileged individuals tend to interpret the 'success' of higher social classes mainly on the basis of meritocratic achievement in education and the workplace, dismissing the privileged access of higher social classes to resources such as social capital (Robinson and Kerr 2009).

The concept of habitus, and in particular its definition as a *sens pratique*, is often debated in terms of whether agents make calculative choices within a field or organization in order to maximize benefits (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992; Tatli and Özbilgin 2012); or, alternatively, if habitus, as a practical sense,

is a tacit experience which can only be interrupted, as agents make sense of events or a crisis situation is interpreted retrospectively (Lahire 2011; Weick 1995). In the case of an atypical leader, class-specific habitus is likely to be interrupted by encounters of power inequality, opening up the possibility of 'reflexive habitus' (Sweetman 2003) as a process of questioning the status quo within organizations: the re-fashioning of their position to avoid discrimination, while building resistance to, and solidarity against, norms of male domination. The disposition of an atypical leader alone cannot predict an inclination towards class-specific or reflexive habitus. It is crucial to demystify the ways in which an atypical leader manifests atypicality in both their discourses and their performative actions at work.

### *The discourse of an atypical leader*

For Bourdieu (1998), elite reproduction is revealed in discourses of taste, refinement and social classification. As such, if it is to make inroads into leadership positions, atypicality needs to adopt or invert the discourses of the elite. Discourses of atypicality can be instigated by an atypical leader and/or by others within an organization, in an attempt to form the identity of, and grant legitimacy to, an atypical leader. These discourses can be narratives, texts, speeches or images that circulate within and beyond organizations in order to celebrate the promotion of an atypical leader. Discourses of atypicality derive from the organizational logic of diversity, and therefore they are 'products and producers of management practices structured along existing power relations' within organizations (Zanoni and Janssens 2004, p. 70).

Discourses on atypicality echo current discourses on the constitution of a leader, such as the 'interest in authenticity, ethics, corporate social responsibility and sustainability' (Kelly 2014, p. 913). The discourse of atypicality can reinforce the material practices of organizations, such as affirmative action, which is legally sanctioned and frames difference as an additional value (Zanoni and Janssens 2015). These discourses can also shape status beliefs, norms, attitudes and behaviours which are morally governed and culturally supported by people in organizations, such as a holiday calendar that takes into account all religious groups (Ridgeway 2014; Zanoni and Janssens 2007). The discursive constitution of an atypical leader can be a powerful tool with which to support marginalized individuals, and can nurture a



culture of inclusion (Bourdieu 1993; Özbilgin *et al.* 2014a).

Nevertheless, diversity discourses and discourses of atypicality can also be manipulated by the senior management of organizations in order to reaffirm management practices unrelated to diversity (Tatli 2011; Zanoni and Janssens 2004). Discourses of atypicality are political, as they involve the ‘construction of antagonisms and the drawing of political frontiers between “insiders” and “outsiders”’ (Howarth and Stavrakakis 2000, p. 4). These discourses can be used, for example, to devalue difference within organizations (Zanoni and Janssens 2004). This is illustrated by a study of minority employees in two Belgian organizations, in which the dominant group used discourses of atypicality to explain the disadvantage of unprivileged minorities, drawing on their ‘lack of skills, schooling, and right attitude’, while minority employees interpreted ‘these positions as the result of racism and discrimination’ (Zanoni and Janssens 2007, p. 1376). In these narratives, merit and capability are often positively charged qualities used for selection and promotion, which serve to privilege the dominant group.

Consequently, discourses of atypicality, particularly when they are mobilized by the dominant group, can construct material or symbolic boundaries that exclude less privileged employees. Overall, discourses of atypicality are important in promoting diversity, but are also contested, as they often stress ideology and difference in organizations. However, it is also important to examine what atypical leaders do (performativity), in order to fully appreciate what constitutes atypicality, something which cannot be reflected in discourses and dispositions alone.

### *The performativity of an atypical leader*

Bourdieu’s concept of habitus is often criticized as offering ‘an “overdetermined” view of subjectivity in which subjective dispositions are tightly tied to the social practices in which they are forged’ (Lovell 2000, p. 11). This version of habitus, which is aligned with class-specific habitus, appears to be an ‘iron cage’ that prescribes the behaviour of an atypical leader based on their social origins and practices. However, we approach the atypical leader as an individual who can potentially resist the status quo, as an innovator from the margins (Alter 2017). Although the notion of reflexive habitus provides an alternative to class-specific habitus, it is relatively silent about how an individual – an atypical leader in this case – can resist

the structures and norms that reproduce the dominant ideology and culture within an organization. This gap is addressed by connecting performativity with reflexive habitus, to emphasize the discursive, embodied and material practices of an atypical leader, which can lead to political action and normative transformation within organizations (Czarniawska 2011; Ford *et al.* 2017).

For Butler (1990), performativity provides a powerful means of resistance to the hegemony of the dominant class through repetitive discursive acts of deconstructing norms (Nentwich *et al.* 2015). Performative acts can legitimize atypicality, as a process of constructing a self-identity that denies dominant norms within a social context (Butler 1993). For instance, the American artist Andy Warhol (1928–1987), a leading figure of the Pop Art Movement in New York (Bockris 2003), legitimized atypicality through his performative acts. Warhol was an insider in New York’s art scene, as he was connected with prominent art dealers, like Leo Castelli, and many celebrities of the time; but also an outsider, who created The Factory, an art organization that promoted artistic experimentation, collectivism and tolerance of difference (Bockris 2003). The example of Warhol epitomizes the performative construction of atypicality through his artistic persona, which manifested his ‘elegance, awkwardness, comedy, or beauty’ (Ladkin 2008, p. 32). Warhol embodied performativity by introducing new images, narratives and myths to the social imaginary, while he experimented with the construction of an androgynous identity that contrasted with the dominant culture and masculine norms of the previous generation of artists in New York, the Abstract Expressionists (Hewer *et al.* 2013).

More broadly, feminism is regarded as a force that challenges male domination, not in the direct way associated with individual attributes, sex or race, but through iterative performative acts, such as speech acts, stances and utterances that attempt to break with the context of male domination, advocating a system of values that promote inclusion, parity and justice (Butler and Athanasiou 2013; Nentwich *et al.* 2015). Although Butler’s (1990, 1993) approach to performativity has influenced thinking about the self-construction of identity, it has received criticism as it ‘reads at times like a voluntarist whose individuals freely don and doff their masks, to make themselves over at will through virtuoso performances of the chosen self’ (Lovell 2000, p. 15). Butler’s performativity is a political act that differs from an intended ‘performance’, defined by Goffman (1959, p. 32) as ‘all the

activity of an individual which occurs during a period marked by his continuous presence before a particular set of observers and which has some influence on the observers'. As performativity (Butler 1993) may not always be sharply distinguished from performances (Goffman 1959), more attention should be paid to the impact of an atypical leader's performative acts on diversity.

In line with Nentwich *et al.* (2015), we combine Bourdieu and Butler's conceptual universes in order to capture the multifaceted constitution of an atypical leader. The dispositional component exposes the source of the authority and power of an atypical leader in organizations, which are socially constructed according to the leader's access to symbolic, cultural and social capital, and is also embodied in their habitus (Bourdieu 1993; Robinson and Kerr 2009). The discursive component delineates the ways in which the salient identity of an atypical leader is manifested in organizational discourses. The performative component stresses the role of an atypical leader in constructing social identities, such as gender, race and sexuality, through their performative actions, which produce images, narratives and symbols beyond the limits of typical perceptions of leaders (Butler 2010; Fehr *et al.* 2015; Grint 2005; Kelly 2014). In this way, reading Bourdieu and Butler together (Nentwich *et al.* 2015) helps us to frame reflexive habitus, which fuels the performative acts of an atypical leader and their attempts to legitimize atypicality, not as an 'iron cage', but as 'second nature' for an atypical leader.

## The dualities of an atypical leader in diversity management

To understand the impact of an atypical leader on diversity beliefs, we need to scrutinize their dispositions, discourses and performances in terms of legitimizing and delegitimizing diversity. Being socially constructed, legitimacy within organizations refers to the cognitive processes and morally governed cultural norms used by internal and external audiences to evaluate actions, behaviours and practices of individuals within an organization (Suchman 1995; Suddaby and Greenwood 2005). These evaluations take place as comparisons in the minds of people, as a particular action and behaviour may converge to or diverge from what is considered credible and taken-for-granted within a social context.

The dispositions, discourses and performative acts of an atypical leader may lead to the gain or loss of

legitimacy for diversity. The concept of legitimacy highlights the actions and behaviours of an atypical leader, vis-à-vis the taken-for-granted power structures that support domination by typical leaders. An atypical leader can be a catalyst for diversity-driven organizational change, by occupying the dual position of at once being an insider, with access to the core, and also an outsider, in terms of identifying with values and positions that are marginalized or under-represented at the core. To analyse the position of an atypical leader, we build on Farjoun's (2010) duality view, according to which antithetical elements in organizations, such as stability and change, or being simultaneously an insider and outsider, are interdependent and, at times, contradictory or complementary. A duality view allows us to analyse the effects of an atypical leader on diversity beliefs, as an atypical leader is often exposed to the dual pressure to simultaneously deliver both emancipation and compliance.

The existence of an atypical leader may challenge what Bourdieu (1990) defines as 'doxa', which maintains the status quo based on 'taken-for-granted' and 'unquestioned truths'. Doxa, being specific to organizations and fields, is a tacit understanding in the minds of people, which defines the 'normal' and the 'rules of the game', while influencing their habitus and illusio (their claims for stakes) within a social space like an organization. Without the notion of doxa, individuals would not be able to distinguish between what is legitimate and what is not. Nevertheless, doxa as the basis for evaluations of legitimacy may lead to the reproduction of inequalities, if certain discriminatory status beliefs remain intact (e.g. while male individuals are more capable leaders). This is the promise of an atypical leader who can potentially instigate changes to doxa within a social setting, by unsettling stereotypes and norms through dispositions, discourses and performative acts.

Through the lens of doxa, we are also able to scrutinize whether and how diversity may be delegitimized if an atypical leader complies with the orthodoxy that maintains the hostility of privileged circles to diversity. At the same time, doxa allows us to read the ways in which diversity may be legitimized if the atypical leader's heterodoxic approach aims to unsettle norms of domination and support the legitimization of diversity at work (Nentwich *et al.* 2015). The existence of interdependencies that simultaneously constitute an atypical leader as both an insider and outsider is promising (Alter 2017), but tells us little about why an atypical leader may comply with the orthodoxy, or under what conditions they are hostile to contradictions

(e.g. lacking the legitimacy within an organization to support diversity-driven change).

Consequently, we need to further unpack whether, and under what conditions, an atypical leader decides to exploit and explore complementarities (e.g. reflexively building alliances with the status quo in order to gain benefits for diversity), which will lead to the legitimization of diversity. According to Farjoun (2010), interdependencies can also exist between contradictory and complementary elements, a view which could shed light on the complexities encountered by an atypical leader, who may perform both orthodox and heterodox practices that lead to dualities for diversity at work.

#### *The role of an atypical leader in delegitimizing diversity*

An atypical leader may not delegitimize diversity by working directly against diversity practices, but their actions, lack of action and other behaviour while in power may result in a loss of legitimacy for diversity. This is possible when an atypical leader operates according to class-specific habitus, either by perceiving themselves as part of the elite or by accepting power distance. This can also happen when an organization pseudo-legitimizes diversity by only giving rhetorical support to diversity and to an atypical leader. The lack of true commitment to diversity by an organization is likely to expose an atypical leader to precarity and, more specifically, to the ‘glass cliff effect’ (Haslam and Ryan 2008) or to increased psychological pressure associated with their gender, class and race when acquiring leadership positions (‘diversity on trial’). It can also prevent the selection of two successive atypical leaders with similar demographic backgrounds (in the ‘head-counting effect’) (Garcia *et al.* 2009).

An atypical leader, who operates based on class-specific habitus, may comply with the orthodox belief that operating like a typical leader is the only way to promote their self-interest and career. However, class-specific habitus is illusory for an atypical leader from a middle- or upper-class background, who may operate out of self-interest, having little desire to transform the power structure, as they may accept precarious leadership positions in exchange for acceptance by the dominant group. Class-specific habitus may also be illusory for a working-class atypical leader, who may tolerate psychological pressure and a working environment that is hostile to difference, believing that this is the only way to progress in their career.

An atypical leader is often promoted by a dominant group as they can serve the establishment in various ways, often in conditions of precarity. Defined as the ‘glass cliff effect’ (Haslam and Ryan 2008; Ryan and Haslam 2007), the dominant group within an organization may invoke the discourse of diversity, but only appoint an atypical leader for precarious positions, as more typical candidates may withdraw because they see particular competitions as less profitable or too risky. The appointment of an atypical leader to a precarious position is often accompanied by a tendency to put ‘diversity on trial’, in which these individuals are subjected to psychological pressure associated with their gender, class and race. If an atypical leader fails, the fact that they are female, minority ethnic or LGBT+ can be highlighted as a cause of that failure. A similar level of scrutiny is rarely directed at a typical leader who fails, as their gender, ethnicity or sexual orientation are not then called into question. It is not often stated that failure is due to the characteristics of the leader, such as being male, white, native or heterosexual.

An atypical leader may reproduce the existing power structures if, due to self-interest or hostility, they do not engage with the negotiation of dominant norms, anticipating instead that they will become part of the establishment (Jonsen *et al.* 2013). Unless the orthodoxy that reproduces inequalities within a social space is challenged, the existence of an atypical leader may indirectly delegitimize diversity, reducing the chances that a future atypical leader will emerge. The backlash in this case may take the form of statements such as ‘We have tried female leaders’, ‘We have enough black leaders’, or ‘We have too many gay leaders’. Head-counting practices of this kind prevent the appointment of more than one atypical individual to an elite leadership position (Garcia *et al.* 2009). More broadly, the glass-cliff and head-counting effects delegitimize diversity by putting it on trial and often by subjecting an atypical leader to impossible challenges, while reducing the chances of future leaders from atypical backgrounds. Unless atypical leaders and organizations both genuinely commit to inclusive practices, pressure from orthodoxy is likely to lead to the delegitimization of diversity.

#### *The role of an atypical leader in legitimizing diversity*

An atypical leader may also choose to challenge the dominant culture and homosocial norms in the workplace. Subscribing to a reflexive habitus, an atypical

leader can stage a form of resistance to, and solidarity against, the power structures that support typicality in organizations. We agree with the view of Nentwich *et al.* (2015, p. 248), who claim that ‘although Bourdieu mainly deals with stability and persistence, and with the difficulties of change, he believes the potential for change is always present if the heterodox would gain voice over the orthodox through political action’. An atypical leader who operates based on reflexive habitus may lack the capital resources required to mobilize change (Lawrence 2008; Sweetman 2003). However, an atypical leader may comply with the orthodoxy in order to build capital resources (symbolic, social and cultural), which can then be reflexively mobilized to transform the status beliefs, norms and regulatory structures that impede or prevent diversity-driven change in organizations.

An example of a capital-building strategy that reflexively pivots habitus is illustrated by the case of Sheryl Kara Sandberg. Sandberg, a University of Harvard graduate and current Chief Operating Officer (COO) at Facebook, has gained legitimacy in the institutional field by working for Google and then Facebook. Through her ‘feminist manifesto’ *Lean In* (2013) (a *New York Times* best-seller) and the creation of the Lean In Foundation (2013), Sandberg has advocated institutional change, empowering women to pursue successful careers and happy family lives. Sandberg is a role model, as a successful female leader from a privileged background (Rottenberg 2014), who operates as both an institutional (Garud *et al.* 2007) and moral entrepreneur (Greenhalgh *et al.* 2019), mobilizing symbolic resources to trigger diversity-driven change at field level.

At a cognitive level, ‘people perceive those who belong to demographic categories different from their own’ to be outsiders (Hooijberg and DiTomaso 1996, p. 14), so an atypical leader may normalize new archetypes of leadership. For instance, Audrey Tang was invited in 2016 to join the Taiwan Executive Yuan as a minister without portfolio, becoming the youngest and first transgender official in that country’s executive government. Tang, an online activist and former consultant for Apple, is tasked with increasing government transparency and bridging the gap in information literacy between older and younger generations of workers. It is thought that her success in this position may change status beliefs and perceptions about transgender people in power, as well as the perception that government positions should be filled by individuals with an elite education, because

Tang is an autodidact, who left school at the age of 12 to become a programmer and later an entrepreneur (Chung 2016).

An atypical leader may help create a ‘new normality’ in organizations where the acceptance of cultural difference is the rule rather than the exception (Eriksen 2006; Fleming and Sturdy 2009). Social transformations and equality in the education system have resulted in an increase in white-collar jobs in society, upgrading the roles of women who develop competitive career paths (Hakim 2003). However, female leaders face subtle mechanisms of resistance. One strand of diversity research focuses on meritocracy in the selection and promotion of employees (Castilla and Benard 2010). Castilla and Benard (2010, p. 543) argue that ‘when an organisational culture promotes meritocracy (compared with when it does not), managers in that organisation may ironically show greater bias in favour of men over equally performing women in translating employee performance evaluations into rewards and other key career outcomes’. Even policies such as affirmative action may not lead to inclusion unless normative and diversity-driven transformation takes place within an organization. This point is also supported by Forstenlechner *et al.* (2012), who demonstrate that affirmative action and quotas have a locally specific, complex and multifaceted relationship with merit. As the authors argue, ‘in many Arab Gulf countries, quotas have become the method of choice to increase labour force participation of home nationals ... [as] the unemployment of home nationals has been rising, even as many jobs are created because most positions are filled by foreign expatriate workers’ (Forstenlechner *et al.* 2012, p. 299).

The regulative pillar refers to legal pressures designed to force organizations to apply diversity policies and initiatives. Dobbin and Kalev (2016, pp. 53–54) interpret the recent moves of large corporations to embrace diversity as resulting from legal sanctions and previous dismissal of regulations: ‘In the late 1990s and early 2000s, Morgan Stanley shelled out \$54 million – and Smith Barney and Merrill Lynch more than \$100 million each – to settle sex discrimination claims. In 2007, Morgan was back at the table, facing a new class action, which cost the company \$46 million. In 2013, Bank of America Merrill Lynch settled a race discrimination suit for \$160 million.’ However, regulatory changes do not guarantee diversity-driven transformation unless they are accompanied by cognitive and normative changes. By emphasizing values, an atypical leader



may foster an environment which is conducive to human rights at work and establishes workplace democracy, while nurturing a culture of caring and inclusion (Lewis and Simpson 2012). The promotion of diversity as best practice, with policies such as affirmative action and training programmes on diversity, may reduce regulatory uncertainty, but does not always constitute an egalitarian environment, as leadership positions are still dominated by white men.

### *The role of an atypical leader in legitimizing and delegitimizing diversity*

A duality view allows us to scrutinize the actions and positions taken by an atypical leader within an organization in order to achieve gains for diversity. Potential gains for diversity require the interaction and negotiation of an atypical leader with the dominant group. Like a diversity professional, an atypical leader 'might criticise the status quo for informally excluding women or minority ethnic people, but they might also be reluctant to employ radical equality measures for fear of provoking backlash among the white male majority, in particular their own sponsors' (Kirton *et al.* 2007, pp. 1982–1983). Expectations to serve both the excluded and the majority may cause contradictory beliefs and psychological discomfort to an atypical leader, a situation known as cognitive dissonance (Festinger 1957), triggering reflexive habitus as a reaction to it. However, an individual from an atypical background is likely to comply with the orthodoxy in order to avoid a backlash from the dominant group when not in power, as well as manifest heterodoxy once they achieve power.

An atypical leader can exploit and explore complementarities using capital resources to access the core, while bringing the views, experiences and values acquired as an outsider to change it. For instance, Tim Cook (2014) decided to actively champion diversity after becoming the CEO of Apple in 2011, coming out in 2014 in an essay published by Bloomberg. Cook (2014) highlights in that essay how he has developed empathy for the marginalized and resilience to hostile dominant norms, which have shaped him as both an individual and a leader. According to Cook (2014): 'If hearing that the CEO of Apple is gay can help someone struggling to come to terms with who he or she is, or bring comfort to anyone who feels alone, or inspire people to insist on their equality, then it's worth the trade-off with my own privacy.' Therefore, the role of atypical leader may transcend the boundaries of an organization, becoming a champion for diversity

in society. This role leads to dualities in disposition, as an atypical leader does not only have to overcome barriers, such as discriminatory status beliefs against LGBT+ leaders, but also has to pivot from the private realm to the public one, compromising individual privacy while being subjected to overexposure and increased scrutiny by the dominant group.

The project of diversity relies on the judgement of an atypical leader and their decisions about how to fight for diversity. An atypical leader should firstly be in a position to recognize and expose those discriminatory status beliefs, norms and regulations that reproduce doxa within the core, and then they should reflexively aim to change them in order to achieve gains for diversity. For instance, the Indian-born Indra Nooyi, former CEO of PepsiCo (2006–2018), is widely recognized as a champion for diversity within organizations (Nooyi, 2016), encouraging female leaders both in her organization and in society as a whole by sponsoring education in countries such as Saudi Arabia, Turkey, Pakistan and Myanmar (Toegel and Barsoux 2012). As an atypical corporate leader, parent and caregiver, Nooyi has been an inspiring voice for many female leaders who are still exposed to the glass-ceiling effect and experience difficulty in maintaining a work–life balance (Sorkin, 2018). In 2018, when Nooyi was replaced by Ramon Laguarta as CEO of PepsiCo, she made the following statement about the succession process: 'I would have loved for the board to have had a woman to pick from. But at the end of the day, the board selects the C.E.O., and we just didn't have any women who were ready for the job.' Although Sorkin (2018) interprets Nooyi's position as an attempt to tackle the glass ceiling, this statement also exposes dualities in diversity discourses. Indeed, the glass ceiling will only be eradicated when there are more leaders from an atypical background (e.g. female). However, it is contradictory when an atypical leader champions one aspect of diversity (e.g. gender diversity) more than others (e.g. ethnic, sexual orientation or social class diversity), creating an illusion that diversity is supported. Diversity discourses are filtered by the habitus of an atypical leader, which reflects their values and judgement.

Although the role of an atypical leader is pivotal in terms of legitimizing diversity beliefs, this might risk placing too much emphasis on the performances of an atypical leader, and giving less attention to the actual impact of their practices on diversity in organizations (Dobbin and Kalev 2016). For instance, Marissa Mayer, former President and CEO of Yahoo



(2012–2018) – and only the second female CEO of Yahoo, after Carol Bartz – was among the few women appointed as a CEO within the male-dominated technology sector (Branson 2018). The Stanford University-educated executive, who started her career at Google, was celebrated by Yahoo and the press as an iconic female leader (Branson 2018). Her ‘star power’ was also fuelled by her engagement with the general audience via social media, which she used to construct an identity as a successful female corporate leader and mother (Gaines-Ross 2013). However, in 2013, Mayer abolished flexible employment at Yahoo, with a potentially negative effect on employees with caring responsibilities (Goel 2016). She justified her strategy by claiming that true innovation occurs when people work together. In addition, Mayer has said ‘she does not think the issue of gender in the workplace is relevant to the technology industry’ (Ferro 2016, n.p.). Performances of diversity can introduce new images, such as that of the successful female leader and mother, which can potentially transform status beliefs in society. However, contradictions can occur as the intentions of an atypical leader may not meet society’s expectation that they will act as champions of diversity.

## Diversity beliefs

The existence of an atypical leader can influence the general level of awareness of, and belief in, the merits of diversity within an organization (Özbilgin 2019). It can legitimize diversity beliefs when diversity within the boardroom is accompanied by diversity practices across an organization (Dobbin and Kalev 2016; Glass and Cook 2018). However, the impact of an atypical leader on diversity beliefs is uncertain and complex because, in order to succeed, they have to overcome significant challenges and barriers to legitimize diversity, often by taking considerable personal and career risks while also acting reflexively to create conditions of parity and inclusion across an organization.

An atypical leader is expected to have an impact on the emergence of future atypical leaders. If an atypical leader contributes to the legitimization of diversity and the normalization of atypicality, future leaders who share a similar background may not be recognized as atypical. By contributing to the construction of a ‘new normality’, an atypical leader has the potential to challenge the meaning of atypicality and progressively shift it from exclusive to

inclusive. However, the delegitimization of diversity may have a negative effect on the emergence of a future atypical leader, due to the marginalization and potential stigmatization of atypicality. An atypical leader has the potential to ultimately achieve important gains for diversity, though not in a linear and progressive way, but in the form of hybrid and dual outcomes.

## Conclusion

The extant literature arguably places excessive hope on atypical leaders in terms of their impact on organizational performance (Alter 2017; Daily and Dalton 2003; Miller and del Carmen 2009). Yet there has also been silence in the literature concerning the effect of an atypical leader on the diversity beliefs of an organization. The general assumption is that an atypical leader may serve to strengthen diversity because of their atypical status at work. For example, the extensive policy support for diversity in the boardroom is underpinned by the assumption that boardroom diversity will trickle down and have a positive impact on the legitimation of diversity elsewhere. In this paper, we demonstrate that, contrary to common expectations, an atypical leader may not only legitimize diversity in organizations but also serve to delegitimize it.

As both an insider and outsider, an atypical leader is uniquely positioned to have an impact on organizational diversity not in a linear way, but because they can innovate from the margins, and pivot from class-specific to reflexive habitus as they capitalize on their very own duality. The dualities of an atypical leader stem from margins which are identified as socially constructed status beliefs that exist within organizational, institutional and national contexts and validate atypicality. However, margins also serve to shape the individual experiences of an atypical leader that equip them with skills and values, such as inclusiveness, perseverance, resilience, adaptability and empathy (Özbilgin 2019).

Although we support the view that atypicality in leadership may bring diversity-driven change in organizations, the project of diversity can be advanced under three conditions. Firstly, the acceptance of difference relies on the ability of an atypical leader to navigate and overcome the constraints of class-specific habitus, in order to create a more democratic, caring and egalitarian environment in which the selection of future atypical leaders will be both possible

and acceptable. Secondly, an atypical leader is not automatically creating a more inclusive environment unless particular actions instigated by them are fully supported by the organizational logic of diversity and diversity practices are applied across the organization. Thirdly, although our main focus in this paper has been the duality of an atypical leader concerning diversity beliefs, we cannot simply rely on the reflexivity of an atypical leader alone to promote diversity: that of all members of an organization is required, in order to mitigate or avert the delegitimization of diversity.

The main contribution of this paper is to raise awareness that the delegitimization of diversity may be caused by the existence of an atypical leader. As our conceptual framework suggests, we need to analyse the dispositions, discourses and performative acts of an atypical leader within their social context in order to determine their impact on diversity beliefs. An atypical leader may indirectly delegitimize diversity beliefs due to the increased pressure or hostility they experience at work. For this reason, there is a risk that an atypical leader may be considered no different from the 'tried and tested' typical ones. We support atypicality in leadership while maintaining a critical stance, in order to ensure that an atypical leader has the opportunity to genuinely support the transformation of diversity beliefs within organizations. An atypical leader who can reflexively promote diversity can also contribute to the normalization of atypicality, reshaping what is considered as typical within a social context on the basis of inclusiveness, openness, responsibility and accountability. However, we also identify the risk that atypicality may be marginalized and subsumed by the typical dominant norms if it is not properly understood and supported by practitioners, organizations and those who educate about diversity.

Future empirical studies based on our framework should aim to determine whether status beliefs change or remain intact after the introduction of an atypical leader. Future empirical research could also focus on cases of leadership succession, determining the conditions under which one atypical leader legitimizes the selection of another in the future. Finally, the meaning of atypicality should not be restricted to a movement from the margins to the core, but could also focus on shifts from the core to the margins: future research could focus on the conditions under which leaders from a dominant group could demonstrably support diversity causes.

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