The Consequences of Diversity in the Public Service: Will a More Diverse Service Also Be Better and More Efficient?


Andrews and Ashworth study ethnic and gender diversity in the British civil service and its consequences for the quality of the workplace in various ways. Opstrup and Villadsen study only gender diversity in top management in Danish local government, and in that sense, their scope is more limited. But the consequences they elucidate are important external goals of the organizations they study.

Both articles find value in diversity, not only in terms of social justice but also in terms of making the public service a better and more efficient servant of the citizens and taxpayers.

Andrews and Ashworth base their reasoning and models on the theory of representative bureaucracy, which argues that government bureaucracies should reflect the composition of the general population in order that policy outcomes might better reflect citizens’ needs. They argue that positive policy outcomes presuppose an inclusive work environment, and they hypothesize that diversity will lead to more inclusion. Their study shows—quite convincingly—that ethnic and gender diversity make workplaces more inclusive and lead to lower levels of discrimination and bullying. There is some evidence that this will also improve performance and productivity, as public sector workers who feel included and not discriminated against will provide better services at a lower cost. As yet, we do not know for sure whether the result will be the more responsive bureaucracy that the theory of representative bureaucracy expects. Although we do not know all of the consequences, certainly the article makes a strong argument in favor of a recruitment policy aiming for greater diversity.

Opstrup and Villadsen also take the theory of representative bureaucracy as their starting point. (Gender) diversity is supposed to lead to a better understanding of the organizational environment and to inspire more creative and innovative output because it brings a wider range of backgrounds and experiences into decision making. But they add a couple of interesting hypotheses. The first is that having more women in top management will bring in managers who have had to overcome more obstacles than their male colleagues to get to the top. Maybe they are simply better and tougher than the rest. The other hypothesis is that women’s cognitive style emphasizes harmony, so having women as part of a team will make it work better and achieve better results.

This again leads to the idea that having more women in top management will improve financial performance, especially in management teams that really work as a team rather than as a collection of individual executives.

Based on data from Danish municipalities, Opstrup and Villadsen provide strong evidence that gender diversity leads to better financial performance, larger surpluses, and smaller overruns, but only if the top management group shares responsibilities broadly.

Comparing the two articles, one could ask at least two questions. The first is, does this ring true to a seasoned practitioner? As far as the Opstrup and Villadsen article is concerned, the short answer is yes. It has been my experience that the women who reach top positions are often extremely well qualified both in intellectual terms and in terms of their ability to make difficult decisions. The Danish public sector has an abundance of women whose potential in top positions we have yet to see. This research might even help a bit in convincing those who hire managers at the top level that they should be looking for more diversity.
But certainly, the contrast between the studies might inspire further research. Is diversity in the whole organization as conducive to sound financial management as diversity at the top? And is there a relationship between diversity, work environment, and productivity?

In conclusion, I would ask a question that Max Weber might have asked: should civil servants—and certainly those in leadership positions—be recruited on the basis of merit alone, and should they act dispassionately and without regard to their personal background? I think the answer is “yes, but . . .” Yes, recruitment and especially promotion must be based on merit. But we now know something that Max Weber did not: that women and minority groups experience difficulties in having their merits recognized. So it should be possible to employ more women and minorities in leadership positions and still maintain the same standard of merit.

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