FACULTEIT ECONOMIE EN BEDRIJFSKUNDE

UNIVERSITEIT GENT

Invitation

You are cordially invited to the public defense to obtain the academic degree of

DOCTOR OF BUSINESS ECONOMICS

by Kabelo Johannes Gildenhuys

A paradox approach to diversity management discourses of dominant group members

Supervisors:
Prof. dr. Smaranda Boroș; Prof. dr. Anita Bosch and Dr. Natasha Winkler-Titus

Thursday, 17 September 2026 at 09h00
Hybrid Format (Joint-PhD) at Stellenbosch Business School, South Africa (Main Building, Bellville Park Campus - Vision/Innovation Room)
OR remotely via Microsoft Teams. Please confirm your attendance by email to tanja@sun.ac.za

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Abstract

Countries with a history of legislated segregation, such as South Africa and the United States, continue to face social conflict and grievances related to racial and gender exclusion, shaping intergroup relations within organisations. While diversity management research has largely focused on previously excluded groups, theory on engaging white men as dominant group members (DGMs), a critical constituency for workplace inclusion, remains underdeveloped. Scholarship often portrays them through a zero-sum lens, emphasising their resistance rather than exploring factors that shape their experience. This dissertation adopts paradox theory, which purposefully holds contradictory yet interdependent factors in tension, resisting oversimplification and fostering critical reflection to move beyond adversarial narratives.

The first component of the dissertation systematically reviews diversity management scholarship to assess how DGMs are represented. Focusing on South Africa and the United States, where their roles remain socially and politically controversial, the analysis applies a paradox-informed and conflict transformation lens. Findings reveal that DGMs are frequently framed through adversarial and dilemma perspectives, reinforcing intergroup tensions and limiting their potential as allies. Such framing constrains discourse and narrows the spaces for identifying solutions. Discourses reflect institutional power and societal ideologies, so the study calls for a reflexive reframing that addresses identity needs, responses to interventions and the potential for allyship, laying the groundwork for repositioning DGMs research toward interdependence and cooperation.

The second component explores how DGMs interpret diversity management within their formative contexts, using the proposed more accessible methodology of embedded sensemaking analysis. Drawing on 32 interviews with DGMs and a critical realist approach, the study identifies generative mechanisms underlying these interpretations of diversity management. While the national contexts of South Africa and the United States reveal material and psychological sources, they have divergent emphases: in South Africa, sensemaking is more materially grounded, shaped by economic insecurity and state-driven transformation; in the United States, consequences manifest as prompts and discretionary choices to deal with internal psychological adaptations to cultural shifts and moral dilemmas. These findings not only underscore the contextual character of diversity management, but challenge universalising policies by advocating context-sensitive strategies and paradox framing which can hold together competing demands as a way forward for managing these tensions.

The third component examines DGMs' experience of ambivalence in South Africa's transformation context, revealing it as a complex psychological and socio-political state rather than manifesting as a binary of either resistance or support. Based on interviews with DGMs (20 participants), three response patterns emerged: striving (constructive management of ambivalence), shifting (oscillation between openness and resistance) and struggling (frustration and reversion to former schema). DGMs response to ambivalence offers a diagnostic lens for improving the implementation of diversity management and highlights the need for interventions that foster integrative complexity, emotional regulation and agency.

Finally, an experimental component examined when and how paradoxical diversity messaging can secure support compared with multicultural framing in the South African context. Across four vignette-based experiments (N = 339), the first experiment showed paradoxical messaging elicited more favourable responses from non-DGMs than from DGMs. In contrast, in Experiments 2-4 with DGMs only, the effects operated primarily through perceived fairness and anticipated inclusion rather than changes in zero-sum beliefs. Credibility produced the clearest fairness-based indirect effect, psychological safety showed a more modest inclusion-based pattern, and economic framing offered little evidence of shifting zero-sum perceptions. Systemic victimhood emerged as a consistent antecedent of ambivalence, with ambivalence shaping when these evaluative pathways led paradoxical messaging to secure support or, alternatively, to backfire. These findings refine the boundary conditions of paradoxical communication and extend theory on recipient-side sensemaking in racially stratified organisational settings.

Curriculum vitae

Kabelo Gildenhuys (1992, Mossel Bay, South Africa) holds a master's in political science (Stellenbosch University, South Africa, 2015) and a master's in public policy and conflict management (University of Erfurt, Germany, 2018). He joined the Faculty of Economics and Business Administration at Ghent University in 2021 as a Joint-PhD Student with Stellenbosch University. Study 1 is published in Frontiers in Organizational Psychology https://doi.org/10.3389/forgp.2025.1525043. Study 2 is published in The Journal of Applied Behavioral Science. https://doi.org/10.1177/00218863261474355. Study 3, at the time of the scheduled defence, was still under review at Equality, Diversity and Inclusion (EDI). Kabelo presented his research at several international conferences, including the International Society of Political Psychology (ISPP), (Virtual, 2021); Gender, Work and Organization (GWO) (Bogota 2022, Stellenbosch Virtual 2023, Nantes Virtual 2025); Equality, Diversity, and Inclusion (EDI) Conference (Cape Town Virtual 2022); Decoloniality, Gender, Equity & Diversity International Conference (Johannesburg Virtual 2022); And a paper presentation at the University of Groningen Summer School (Groningen, 2024).