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Journal of Diversity and Gender Studies

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DiGeSt Journal of Diversity and Gender Studies, Volume 13, Issue 1
https://doi.org/10.21825/digest. 93846
Print ISSN: 2593-0273. Online ISSN: 2593-0281
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Contested Collaborations. Diversity Change Agents Practicing Boundary Work in the Dutch Military

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Abstract
Power and resistance are inherent to diversity work and, especially in large organizations, oftentimes multiple individual and collective actors will work on diversity change simultaneously. Yet, the (lack of) collaboration between diversity change agents within the same organization remains understudied. This paper draws on a case study of diversity work in the Dutch military. Analyzing diversity change agents' dynamics of collaboration and competition through the notion of boundary work, we show diversity change agents practicing boundary work on three issues: 1) responsibility for and ownership of Diversity & Inclusion (D&I) policies, 2) representation and voice of organizational minority groups, and 3) the scope of diversity and inclusion. We explore the ways in which diversity change agents draw, defend, downplay and change those boundaries. We conclude that the ways in which diversity work is organized can encourage or hinder collaboration between diversity change agents, which impacts the extent to which they can combat organizational inequalities.

Keywords
Diversity work; diversity change agents; collaboration; competition; boundary work

Introduction

While several studies have identified the strategies of diversity change agents (Kelan & Wratil, 2018; Kirton & Greene, 2019) and the challenges they face (Bhopal, 2023; Özbilgin & Tatli, 2011), there is a significant gap in understanding how these agents collaborate and form alliances within and beyond their organizations to advance diversity efforts (Blommaert & Van den Brink, 2020; Kornau et al., 2023). Recognizing diversity work as a deeply political and power-laden process (Tatli et al., 2015), our study explores the dynamics of collaboration and competition between various diversity change agents. Studying their 'diversity work' matters because it shapes access to opportunities, voice, and recognition at work (Van den Brink & Blommaert, 2026). Yet translating Diversity & Inclusion (D&I) commitments into sustained change is difficult, as initiatives are often compartmentalized, contested, or largely symbolic. This makes it crucial to understand how multiple actors collaborate and compete in defining what D&I is, who it is for, and who gets to lead it.

Based on four years of fieldwork within the Dutch military, this paper answers the following research question: *When multiple actors work on D&I, how can we explain their (lack of) collaboration through the notion of boundary work and what are the consequences for doing diversity work?* The Dutch military is a particularly revealing case to study boundary work in D&I because it combines a strongly hierarchical, assimilation-oriented organization with deeply ingrained gendered norms and a workforce that remains highly homogeneous (Bosch, 2023; Heinecken & Soeters, 2018). At the same time, recent years have seen an explicit top-level push to develop D&I policies and interventions, which makes the Dutch military an instructive setting for examining how multiple change agents negotiate responsibilities, representation, and the scope of D&I amid both change efforts and resistance. Analyzing meetings between diversity change agents and interviews, we identify three issues of boundary work: 1) responsibility for and ownership of D&I policies; 2) representation and voice of organizational minority groups; 3) the scope of diversity and inclusion. We scrutinize the mix of competitive, collaborative, and configurational boundary work regarding these three issues. From this, we identify three factors that may encourage or hinder change agents' collaboration: compartmentalization in the organizational structure and culture, a lack of vision regarding diversity and inclusion, and uncertainty about role allocation. We contribute to theories on diversity work and diversity change agents by showing the significance of how organizations organize diversity work and suggest possibilities for change.

Theoretical background

Diversity change agents doing diversity work

Diversity change agents operate within a highly political and contested arena. Engaging in diversity work involves navigating complex power dynamics and resistance, where the goal of change often clashes with entrenched organizational norms and values (Piderit, 2000; Lombardo & Mergaert, 2016). Organizations themselves are arenas of competing perspectives and interests, which complicates the process of implementing diversity initiatives (Özbilgin & Tatli, 2011). Diversity change agents include individuals such as middle managers, diversity officers, and CEOs (Kirton et al., 2007; Kelan & Wratil, 2018), as well as collectives like diversity networks (Dennissen et al., 2019). These agents frequently face barriers related to their position and power within the organization. Often, the responsibility for diversity tasks is assigned to those with relatively little authority, which undermines their ability to effect change (Bhopal, 2023; Kirton & Greene, 2019). The effectiveness of diversity change agents is also influenced by whether they belong to the organizational majority or minority (Ahmed, 2007), and their work is generally more challenging when they come from minority groups (Johnston & Yarrow, 2024). Access to strategic resources, whether through formal roles, volunteer positions, or budgets, can enable or constrain their efforts (Özbilgin & Tatli, 2011). Finally, a significant barrier is often the

lack of organizational support, exemplified by senior leaders who defend the status quo, the marginalization of diversity workers, and widespread resistance to change (Saba et al., 2021).

While previous research tends to focus on individuals and not on groups of actors (Blommaert & Van den Brink, 2020; Kornau et al., 2023), creating alliances with external stakeholders is important for doing diversity work (Tatli, 2011; Tatli et al., 2015). How multiple diversity change agents within the same organization navigate the complex field of doing diversity work remains largely understudied. Some exceptions, such as Blommaert and Van den Brink (2020, 2026), study different actors and observe different dynamics between diversity actors, such as the formation of coalitions. These coalitions made change agents more assertive, convinced moderate change agents to give their support, and spurred them into action. Other studies also demonstrate that when limited resources or opportunities are available, it is difficult for diversity change agents (Bhopal, 2023) or diversity networks (Dennissen et al., 2020) to collaborate. Kelan (2017) shows how a women's network and gender equality officers in one organization compete over how to define gender equality and over who gets credit for creating change.

The small number of studies that address the dynamics between diversity change agents suggest that coalition building might spur change agents into action, and that competition over credit or a lack of resources might hinder collaboration. However, how diversity change agents within the same organization relate to each other has only sporadically been subject of research. By scrutinizing the dynamics between multiple diversity change agents in the military, this study provides further insight into the complexities of doing diversity work.

Boundary work

In research on diversity and inclusion, the concept of boundary work proves valuable to comprehend organizational distinctions between groups on the basis of categories such as gender, race, and sexuality (Johansson & Lundgren, 2015; Persson, 2010). Recently, Van Eck et al. (2024) used boundary work to understand organizational in- and exclusion. Building on these studies, we turn to boundary work to explain change agents (lack of) collaboration in doing diversity work. In line with Langley et al. (2019), we conceptualize boundary work as intentional acts by organizational members, either individuals or groups, to influence organizational boundaries. Examples of boundaries are which groups are allowed to do certain tasks, or what tasks are deemed important. Practicing boundary work thus 'means (trying) to determine which distinctions become relevant' (Van Eck et al., 2024, p. 235). Boundary work is an effort to influence social, symbolic, material, and temporal boundaries (Langley et al., 2019). The difference between social and symbolic boundaries is particularly relevant for this study. Symbolic boundaries are socially constructed interpretive distinctions concerning concepts (e.g., what counts as 'scientific', 'legal', or 'ethical'), whereas social boundaries refer to distinctions among social groups that include some people while excluding others; symbolic distinctions may, but need not, be embodied in social group boundaries (Langley et al., 2019, p. 5).

Boundary work is not practiced in a vacuum; it is shaped both by the agency of organizational members and by the existing power relations in an organization (Van Eck et al., 2024). Consequently, boundaries are dynamic and fluid (Meier, 2015). Practicing boundary work can have consequences for collaboration, inclusion, and exclusion (Langley et al., 2019). Furthermore, collaboration can happen through boundary work (Comeau-Vallée & Langley, 2020), by dismantling or bridging boundaries. Applying a boundary work lens allows us to explain a variety of relations between diversity change agents, ranging from competition and exclusion to collaboration. Langley et al. (2019) distinguish three types of boundary work: competitive, collaborative, and configurational. These concepts are helpful in understanding the complex dynamics between diversity change agents in our study. Competitive boundary work involves emphasizing distinctions and exclusive rights in order to gain control, claim ownership, or secure jurisdiction over D&I (e.g., 'who leads D&I,'

'whose definitions count,' 'which group is represented'). By contrast, collaborative boundary work involves downplaying distinctions and highlighting shared goals to enable coordination and mutual benefit across groups and roles (e.g., aligning agendas, pooling expertise, creating joint initiatives). Lastly, configurational boundary work involves efforts to reconfigure boundaries more fundamentally by redefining categories, roles, and responsibilities, or by reshaping the institutional arrangements through which D&I is organized (e.g., changing mandates, governance structures, or the scope of what D&I includes). Some authors suggest competitive, collaborative, and configurational boundary work can be intertwined in practice (Langley et al., 2019) and opposing forms of boundary work can co-exist (Comeau-Vallée & Langley, 2020). Understanding boundary work thus helps us make sense of the division of labor between the different diversity change agents, which is crucial to understanding their dynamics and why they (do not) cooperate.

Methodology

Case description: diversity work in the Dutch military

Our analysis draws on a qualitative study of diversity work in the Dutch military. The organization has a homogenous workforce, with women making up less than twenty percent of the 80000 employees.[1] While no data is available concerning other minority groups, such as ethnic minorities and LGBT personnel, Andriessen et al., (2017) suggest that these groups are even less represented. The organization also has a prevailing assimilation culture (Shore et al., 2011): individuals are only considered to belong when they downplay their uniqueness to conform to the dominant culture. This manifests, for example, in women trying to conform to a masculine norm and a reluctance to report discriminatory incidents (Andriessen et al., 2017). Yet, in recent years the military has become increasingly interested in D&I (Bosch, 2023), and consequently has installed specific personnel, teams, and meetings to achieve this goal. In this study, we investigate the dynamics of collaboration and competition between these diversity change agents, while taking the broader organizational culture and structure into account.

Within the Dutch military, many different actors, on different levels, do diversity work. Analytically, we divide these actors into four groups: 1) the Central Staff (D&I policy officer, D&I contact Central Staff, team gender in operations, expertise centers), mainly responsible for developing D&I policies; 2) the D&I contacts of the six military and support branches, mainly responsible for implementing D&I policies; 3) team D&I, mainly responsible for coordinating diversity work; and 4) the diversity networks, which are independent foundations and not officially part of the organization. Figure 1 provides an organizational chart, in which these groups are color-coded. These actors (are supposed to) meet every other month in a diversity meeting, the Inclusivity Meeting Defense (IMD). The findings include further elaboration on the role and position of these change agents.

[1] Infographic Ministry of Defense personnel number September 2025 (retrieved 11 March 2026 via: <https://www.defensie.nl/onderwerpen/o/overdefensie/het-verhaal-van-defensie/aantallen-personeel>

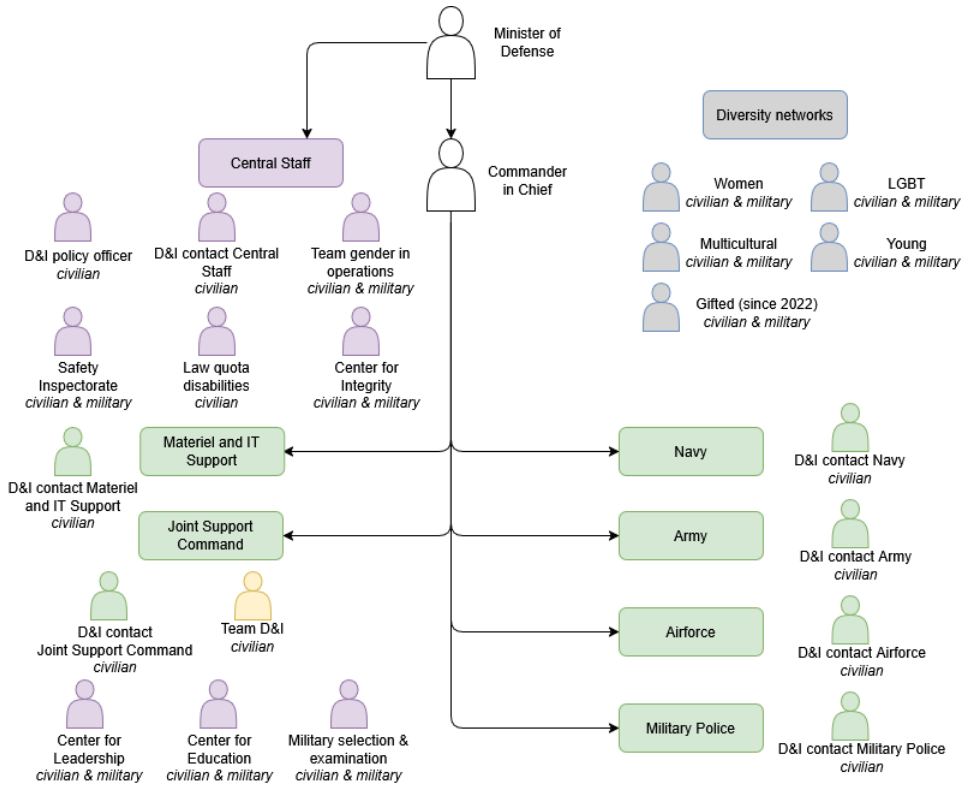

Figure 1. Overview of actors involved in diversity work in the Dutch military, color-coded into four analytical groups

Data collection and research strategy

This study is primarily based on observations of the Inclusivity Meeting Defense (IMD), supplemented with in-depth interviews, other observations, and policy documents. Data was gathered between September 2019 and June 2023. The first author observed fifteen IMD meetings, one meeting between the diversity networks and the central staff, and three diversity events. Notes were taken to record discussions and participants' contributions. Due to COVID-19, the majority of IMD meetings took place online. Additionally, thirteen semi-structured interviews were conducted with key actors from each analytical group (see Table 1). Interviews lasted between thirty and ninety minutes and were recorded and transcribed verbatim. Topics discussed included motivation to do diversity work, daily work activities, relations with other diversity change agents, and (possible) resistance to diversity change. Both meetings and interviews were held in Dutch. Consequently, citations included in this article were translated to English by the authors. Lastly, several documents provided insights: the D&I policy (2022), the social safety action plan (2018), and the action plan on Women, Peace and Security (2021-2025). Participants' exact job title and, sometimes, their team, network, or organizational branch are not mentioned to protect their anonymity. The thirteen interviews include relatively more respondents from Diversity Networks (six board members) than from Central Staff (two officers) and branch D&I contacts (three contacts). In addition, the multicultural network declined to participate. This limits our ability to capture that network's perspective on boundary work around representation and voice. Our analysis of this specific social boundary is therefore necessarily partial and relies on meeting observations and the accounts of other actor groups.

Table 1. Overview of interviews

Central staff	Military branches	Team D&I	Diversity networks
2 D&I policy officers	D&I contact Army	2 team members	Women's network: 2 board members
	D&I contact Military police		LGBT network: 3 board members
	D&I contact Navy		Young network: 1 board member

Data analysis

The initial data analysis involved multiple readings and open coding. This showed diversity change agents drawing and redrawing boundaries, which led us to the concept of boundary work (Langley et al., 2019). Analyzing our data through this lens allowed us to identify a wide range of boundaries, including those between diversity actors, between minority groups, and between different diversity-related topics. Comparing and contrasting, three issues emerged that highlight the dynamics of collaboration and competition between change agents: 1) responsibility for and ownership of D&I policies, 2) representation and voice of minority groups, and 3) the scope of diversity and inclusion. The first two issues regard social boundaries, while the third concerns a symbolic boundary. Subsequently, we deductively looked for instances of competitive, collaborative, and configurational boundary work (Langley et al., 2019) within these three issues.

Findings

In this section, we explain the complex dynamics between diversity change agents through three different issues on which boundary work is practiced. Figure 2 provides a roadmap of the findings by linking each issue to the main actor groups involved and indicating which boundary-work modes are most salient.

Boundary work regarding responsibility and ownership

The first issue regards responsibility for and ownership of D&I policies. The organization proclaims to act according to a division between, on the one hand, those responsible for 'developing' policies and, on the other hand, those responsible for 'the implementation' of those policies. This division exists for any policy and implementation thereof within the Dutch military and has consequences for doing diversity work. The Central Staff is responsible for developing policies, and the military and support branches for implementing these policies. Our research highlights two modes of boundary work.

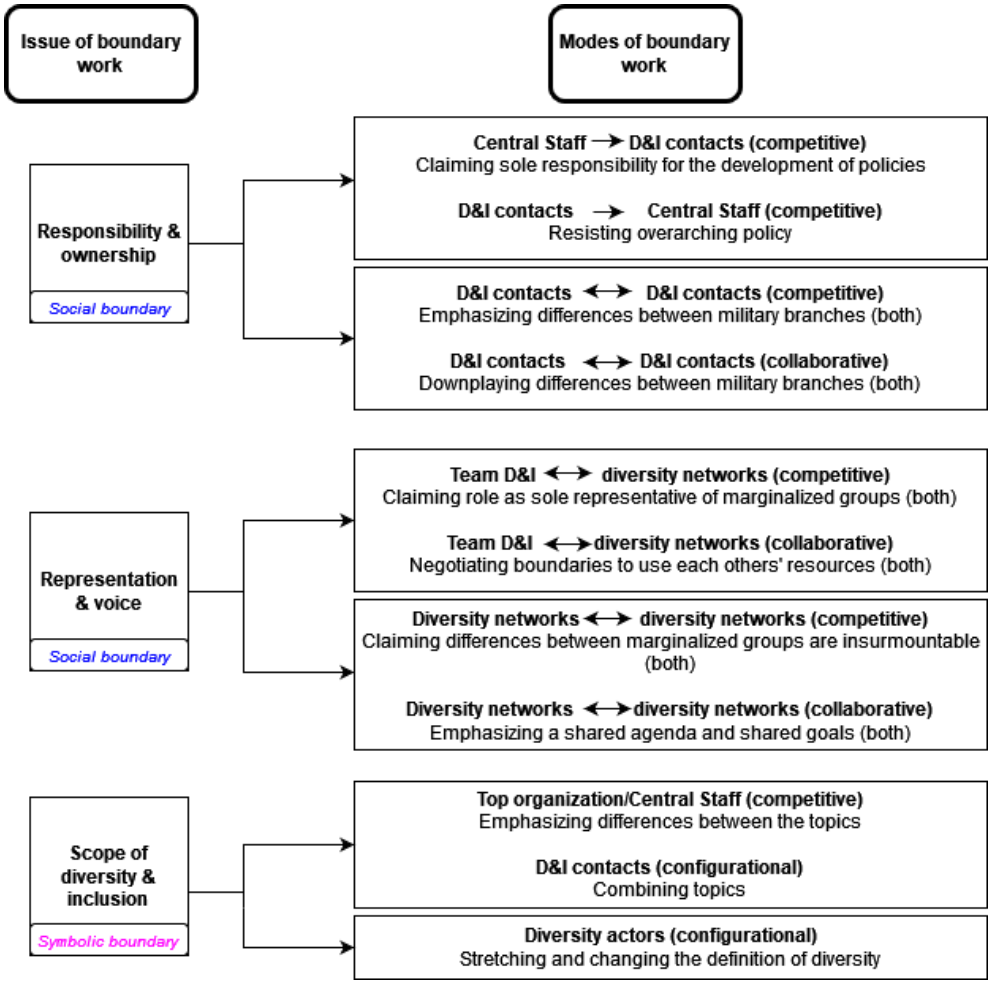

Figure 2. Overview of findings

First, we identify competitive boundary work practiced by the Central Staff and the D&I contacts of the military and support branches regarding the development of an overarching policy. The Central Staff practices competitive boundary work towards the D&I contacts by claiming sole responsibility for developing D&I policies. The most striking example is the D&I policy plan (2021), which included target figures for women and directions to embed D&I in all educational programs. It was created in collaboration with the commander in chief but with minimal to no input from the D&I contacts. Although the Central Staff admitted this 'leaves something to be desired', they argued D&I contacts should 'seize the opportunities' the plan offered.[2] In response, D&I contacts practice competitive boundary work towards the Central Staff by expressing little need for a shared policy. One D&I contact said that what they were looking for was 'not necessarily an overarching D&I policy'.[3] They preferred developing their own plans and enacting those, without Central Staff involvement. D&I contacts said: 'I would like to do my own thing', and expressed to the Central Staff: 'we're

[2] September 2021, IMD
[3] March 2021, IMD

not going to let you stop us'.[4] After the development of the D&I policy plan, D&I contacts practiced competitive boundary work by prioritizing their own ideas and plans. One said she would be 'very annoyed' if she had to change her own D&I plan because it 'doesn't fit the bigger picture'.[5] Moreover, D&I contacts practice competitive boundary work towards the Central Staff by disagreeing with their claim to ownership over D&I policies. After the development of the D&I policy plan, D&I contacts expressed frustration that they were 'confronted with "this is the plan",' and they demanded to give more input than 'just feedback on a plan that is already finished'.[6] As a complicating factor, despite the Central Staff's responsibility for drafting policies, they do not provide a budget to the organizational branches for implementing said policy. One D&I policy advisor said in an interview: 'the Central Staff is not going to pay for the military branches.' Branches are thus responsible for affording plans developed by the Central Staff. This first mode of boundary work consequently shows two groups competing over who is allowed to develop D&I policies. The Central Staff tries to claim sole responsibility and ownership, while the D&I contacts resist - what they perceive as - the top-down dictation of a D&I policy plan and emphasize their preference to work on their own.

As a second mode, we identify competitive boundary work practiced by D&I contacts of the military and support branches against each other. When asked to collaborate or to implement the shared D&I policy plan, D&I contacts emphasize differences between the military branches.

> The military branches sometimes make their own policy, just because they have their own culture. […] For example, the Navy, yeah they are the only ones with ships so they sometimes need to do completely different things compared to the people with planes. (Interview D&I policy advisor from the Central Staff)

These cultural and structural differences between military branches were constantly reiterated, even by the deputy commander in chief. During one meeting, the Central Staff said organizational branches were 'independent to do and not do what they want to'.[7] D&I contacts use these arguments to claim it would be impossible for them to collaborate or implement one D&I policy plan. As one D&I contact said: 'the differences are too big'.[8] In an interview, a member of team D&I argued*:* 'we are all part of one organization, but people do not see it that way.' Consequently, the D&I contacts prefer to work separately. Only rarely do the D&I contacts downplay boundaries between branches to collaborate. For example, during a IMD meeting in October 2021, the D&I contacts realized they were all trying to create a similar training module and they agreed to 'bundle what [they] have.'

Overall, the issue of responsibility and ownership shows diversity change agents practicing multiple forms of boundary work, albeit mostly competitive. Diversity management is a process of change in which policy and its enactment should be constructed in constant dialogue (Eriksson-Zetterquist & Renemark, 2016), and those responsible for implementing a diversity policy should feel ownership over this policy (Kirton et al., 2016). Nonetheless, diversity change agents rigidly separate the development of policies from their implementation. While the D&I contacts want to be more involved with policies, they have an antagonistic view of the Central Staff. Although military organizations are considered 'bureaucracies par excellence' with a clear division of labor (Soeters, 2018, p. 254), the diversity change agents disagree about task division. It is common for military organizations

[4] March 2021, IMD
[5] November, 2021, IMD
[6] November, 2021, IMD
[7] September 2020, IMD
[8] March 2021, IMD

to have distinct subcultures per branch, but these (perceived) subcultures can be problematic when organizational members prioritize the interest of their own branch above all else (Soeters, 2018). The D&I contacts perceive the differences between their branches as more significant than the possible similarities offered by their doing diversity work.

Boundary work regarding representation and voice

The second issue regards who serves as the voice of the marginalized groups in the organization. The main minority groups are women, LGBT employees, and employees with a multicultural background (Andriessen et al., 2017). This issue involves the diversity networks and team D&I competing over who gets to represent these minority groups.

Our study highlights two modes of boundary work with regard to representation and voice. First, we identify both competitive and collaborative boundary work practiced by the networks and team D&I towards each other. Both groups practice competitive boundary work to claim the role of sole representative. The networks want to be spokesperson for their minority group and react negatively to the work of team D&I. When team D&I organized an event for Coming Out Day and developed an information leaflet concerning transgender employees, the LGBT network felt 'team D&I was doing our job' (interview LGBT network). Moreover, both feel the other group tries to claim credit for their work. When team D&I organized an event for which they put out rainbow themed cookies, someone 'placed [a leaflet with] information about the LGBT network next to the cookies, as if it were [the LGBT network's] cookies.' (interview team D&I). On the other hand, a board member of a diversity network said: 'We took a group picture during a network day we had organized and [team D&I] put it on LinkedIn as if they had organized it.' In both instances, these actions could be interpreted as furthering the D&I cause. However, these actors (choose to) see it as a competition. Moreover, the diversity networks and team D&I practice competitive boundary work by arguing that the other group should not exist. The diversity networks do not understand why team D&I has been established, as 'in each network, they could have made three fulltime board positions. […] I don't think this was the right choice. I feel like we've been passed over' (interview LGBT network). On the other hand, team D&I argues the networks should be disbanded. During an interview, one member of team D&I said: 'If it were up to me […] we would shut down those networks, or the Ministry stops giving them money.' The diversity networks prefer additional fulltime positions board positions compared to team D&I being responsible for coordinating diversity work while team D&I does not see the value of the diversity networks as representatives of the marginalized groups. Both the diversity networks and team D&I consequently do not acknowledge the need for different types of diversity change agents in creating change.

Yet, both groups also practice collaborative boundary work towards each other. The diversity networks want to 'collaborate with' team D&I for money, information, and manpower. A board member of the women's network said: 'Team D&I has time to do stuff for us.' Networks would even use collaborative and competitive boundary work simultaneously, as exemplified in the following quote:

> For Coming Out Day, […] we could not have done it without [team D&I], because they made sure that there were cookies and flags, which was great! […] But it felt a bit like: I think this is our job. (Interview LGBT network)

On the one hand, this shows the LGBT network practicing competitive boundary work by claiming that organizing something for Coming Out Day is their job. Yet, they negotiate these boundaries to allow collaboration with team D&I, if they can use team D&I's resources. Team D&I argued that they did try to involve the networks.

> Especially the diversity networks can easily feel, 'you are doing our work.' So, when we are going fast, and despite us telling them about our plans and that they can join… before they have thought about it, it is almost over. (Interview team D&I)

According to team D&I, the networks often respond too slowly to collaborate. This reflects structural differences between the groups, as team D&I works full-time on diversity change, while members of the diversity networks are volunteers.

As a second mode, we identify both competitive and collaborative boundary work practiced by the diversity networks towards each other. They first engage in competitive boundary work by claiming that the differences between the minority groups they represent are insurmountable. During a meeting[9], someone suggested the diversity networks could collaborate more, to which the women's network responded that the differences between the marginalized groups are too big for that. During the next meeting, the multicultural network claimed that their members' problems were bigger than the other networks'.[10] They argued that people with a 'different sexual orientation' could already be found in the organization's highest positions and that, although women's issues were still 'a thing', it was going okay. They said: 'But if we're being honest, if we look at the higher regions of the organization, how many people with a different skin color do you see?' Another instance showed how difficult it was for the multicultural network to be heard, compared to other groups. During this meeting, someone shared what had recently been organized for employees with autism. Some people expressed surprise, because they 'had a hard time getting things started for people with a non-Western background'.[11] The chairman argued that this difference was easily explained by the fact that someone had worked very hard on the topic of autism. The chair of the multicultural network objected to this: 'Maybe we should not discuss this. Because what are we really saying? There have been so many people over the years who have worked hard. We are ignoring the pain of a big group of people.' This discussion showed that – according to some diversity change agents - there is a difference in how the minority groups within the organization are perceived. They argue that it is easier to create change for groups that are not automatically linked with sensitive topics such as discrimination and racism.

Yet in certain instances, the diversity networks practice collaborative boundary work towards each other. They downplay boundaries by stating they have a 'shared agenda' because all of them 'argue for emancipation of their members who are also a minority' (interview LGBT network). In recent years, the networks successfully collaborated to lobby the Central Staff to increase the number of hours board members can spend working for the networks. As one board member of the LGBT network said: 'That was when we all came together as networks and said: you [Central Staff] need to fix this.' When the networks have a shared – instrumental – goal, they do collaborate. However, our analysis did not reveal instances in which the networks downplayed boundaries between minority groups.

Overall, regarding the issue of representation and voice, diversity change agents practice both competitive and collaborative boundary work. On the one hand, the diversity networks and team D&I compete over who gets to represent the marginalized groups, as they both want to get credit for this work (Kelan, 2017). Instead of collaborating to reach a (presumed) common goal, both would rather see the other group disbanded. This competition is exacerbated by the limited resources and different opportunities available for both groups (Bhopal, 2023). The diversity networks, created as independent foundations, are positioned outside of the organization, while team D&I takes a more central place. The diversity networks are run by volunteers (Fisher & Roper, 2015) who have limited time available, in contrast to team D&I. Additionally, both the members of team D&I and the board members

[9] September 2019, IMD
[10] October 2019, IMD
[11] December 2020, IMD

of the diversity networks are organizational minorities, as they are all female, LGBT, or multicultural employees. This further limits their power and places them in a precarious position (Ahmed, 2007; Johnston & Yarrow, 2024). On the other hand, when they can benefit from collaboration, the change agents do see possibilities for cooperation. Particularly the networks form coalitions (Blommaert & Van den Brink, 2020) to advance their collective interests.

Lastly, the competitive boundary work between the diversity networks highlights that they are organized in a single category structure: they each represent only one identity category, such as women, or LGBT employees. This conceals the existence of multiple intersecting identities (Dennissen et al., 2020). Emphasizing boundaries between minority groups, the diversity networks show a lack of intersectional perspective (Rodriguez et al., 2016) on organizational (in)equality. They assume that minority groups face radically different problems and overlook employees who are disadvantaged across multiple axes of difference. Moreover, the diversity networks imply that some minority groups are more disadvantaged than others, without taking these intersections into account. In short, both team D&I and the diversity networks are focused on a competition over who gets to represent who, which overshadows the (presumed) shared goal of combating organizational inequalities.

Boundary work regarding the scope of diversity and inclusion

The last issue regards the scope of diversity and inclusion. This issue concerns a symbolic boundary, namely the definition of a concept. The Dutch military does not only want to increase diversity and inclusion, but a variety of related issues. As someone said during a meeting: 'The Ministry wants so much, there are many change programs: D&I, social safety, integrity, transparency…'[12] In addition to D&I, our analysis shows that the two most important topics are social safety[13] and gender in military operations.[14] The teams responsible for these topics also take part in the IMD meeting, because these are people who 'concern themselves with D&I in the broadest sense of the term' (IMD chair).[15]

We observed two modes of boundary work regarding the scope of diversity and inclusion. First, we identify the Central Staff and the D&I contacts of the military and support branches practicing competitive and configurational boundary work regarding how these topics should be separated or combined. People at the top of the organization, such as employees at the Central Staff and the commander in chief, practice competitive boundary work regarding the scope of D&I. They emphasize the differences between D&I, gender in operations, and social safety. Separate teams have been established, and separate policy documents have been developed for the three topics.[16] Additionally, both D&I and gender in operations have their own 'directing committee'.[17] Yet, the D&I contacts do not agree with these boundaries. They practice configurational boundary work by aiming to combine the topics, notably.by trying to integrate them into one action plan. As one of the D&I contacts said: 'I'm still planning to integrate gender and D&I. I see no point in approaching them separately'.[18] Another said that, in their branch, 'D&I is part of social safety'.[19] Furthermore,

[12] March 2022, IMD

[13] According to the military's Action Plan for social safety (2018) this refers to "protecting each other from undesirable behavior, appreciating individual differences, and the possibility to learn with mutual trust as starting point" (p. 5)

[14] For the implementation of UN Security Council Resolution 1325 (2000) on Women, Peace, and Security (WPS) (S/RES/1325 (2000)).

[15] December 2020, IMD

[16] November 2021, IMD

[17] The existence of these "directing committees" was discussed multiple times during IMD meetings, e.g. in October 2019, December 2020, March 2021, March 2023

[18] February 2021, IMD

[19] October 2019, IMD

the D&I contacts express a wish for the Central Staff to develop an overarching vision on gender in operations, D&I and social safety. During a meeting with the deputy commander in chief, a D&I contact said they missed direction on how to 'connect these things together'.[20] They suggested a shared vision to 'give […] guidance'. However, the deputy commander in chief argued this was 'complicated', as the 'structure, dynamic and composition' of the organizational branches were 'very different'. This echoes the competitive boundary work practiced by the D&I contacts regarding responsibility and ownership, they emphasize the differences between military branches. This mode of boundary work shows how diversity change agents either try to separate or combine the range of topics related to diversity and inclusion.

Second, we identify diversity change agents (from all four groups) practicing configurational boundary work by changing the definition of diversity and inclusion. The commander of one of the centers argued that four white men in uniform are also diverse because everyone has different talents, while the director of another center claimed that being introverted or liking poetry also falls under diversity.[21][22] When discussing the meaning of diversity during an interview, a member of team D&I said: 'For me, all visible and invisible differences are by definition diversity.' Through these statements, diversity change agents widened the scope of diversity. During a meeting in 2021, the option was discussed to create a diversity network for gifted employees. While this network was indeed founded – which changed the boundaries of what diversity means – it also sparked a discussion on these boundaries. Some claimed that a lot of employees, especially those not represented by the networks, felt the need to 'stop creating categories' (D&I contact military branch).[23] During another meeting, a D&I contact argued that creating more diversity networks meant that the organization 'does not exude inclusion.' According to her, employees felt that the increasing number of networks meant that as an organization 'we are falling apart.'[24] An increase in diversity networks was perceived by some diversity change agents not as an opportunity for more disadvantaged groups to be represented, but as a threat to (their perception of) organizational inclusion.

Overall, regarding the scope of diversity and inclusion, different change agents practice different types of boundary work. The top of the organization mainly practices competitive boundary work. Their push to keep the various topics separate means that different, and thus more people, contribute to diversity and its related topics. This could function similarly to a gender and diversity mainstreaming strategy (Lombardo & Mergaert, 2016), because the work becomes increasingly widespread throughout the organization, with progressively more people doing diversity work. However, despite the existence of the IMD, we observe a lack of coordination between the different teams, making it difficult to collaborate. Some of the D&I contacts highlight connections between the topics. Their configurational boundary work shows instances in which cooperation can be possible, for example in formulating a shared vision.

Furthermore, our analysis shows uncertainty about what diversity and inclusion entail. Some argue that inclusion is threatened by an increase in diversity categories or networks. Yet, being asked to downplay uniqueness in favor of the dominant culture suggests assimilation instead of inclusion (Andriessen et al., 2017). Others negotiate what should be part of diversity. An ambiguous definition of diversity could lead to broader dissemination and thus collaboration, because more people would be able to recognize their own interpretation in the concept. However, Adamson et al., 2021 have indicated the risks of defining diversity so broadly that it includes any attribute, such as liking poetry or being

[20] March 2022, IMD
[21] June 2023, IMD
[22] November 2019, in speech during diversity event
[23] October 2021, IMD
[24] March 2022, IMD

introverted. Doing so masks unequal power relations and organizational inequalities. Consequently, when diversity change agents redefine diversity and inclusion to create a broader definition, they may prevent structural change. Yet it might also point to them having limited knowledge of how to do (critical) diversity work.

Discussion and conclusion

To date, the vast majority of research on diversity change agents focuses on individual change agents (e.g. Bhopal, 2023; Kirton & Greene, 2019). This paper advances our knowledge on diversity change agents and diversity work in the Dutch military by exploring how multiple diversity change agents relate to each other within the same organization. To explain diversity change agents' (lack of) collaboration, this research analyzes their dynamics through the notion of boundary work. We find that this boundary work is mostly competitive: only rarely do change agents downplay boundaries to facilitate collaboration. While a few other authors have also studied the competitive dynamics between diversity change agents, our findings show that these dynamics cannot be solely explained as a competition over scarce resources (Bhopal, 2023) or credit (Kelan, 2017). Instead, our analysis shows the significance of the way organizations organize diversity work. Without an organizational infrastructure that facilitates it, collaboration between diversity change agents becomes difficult.

We learn three theoretical lessons from our findings. First, while other research on diversity change agents has highlighted the importance of the organizational structure and power relations (Bhopal, 2023; Özbilgin & Tatli, 2011), our study adds to these findings that both the organizational structure and culture play a significant role in fostering competition or collaboration between diversity change agents. Diversity change agents constantly (re)enforce boundaries between tasks, groups, and military branches. This boundary work mirrors the compartmentalization of the organizational structure, characterized by a divide between the development of policies and their implementation, the different branches, and the different roles of diversity change agents. One aspect of the organizational structure -the IMD meeting- is specifically designed for collaboration, yet in practice it does not fulfill this role. Moreover, the organizational culture contributes to competition between diversity change agents, as it emphasizes the (assumed) insurmountable differences between the various branches and departments. Because of this, change agents are discouraged from reaching out across organizational boundaries. Consequently, it becomes almost impossible to highlight similarities in the inequality regimes (Acker, 2006; Sasson-Levy, 2011) of the different organizational branches, or even to consider whether the topic of diversity and inclusion could be tackled with an overarching approach. Our findings therefore support the claim that the belief in distinct subcultures in the military is common yet can be problematic (Soeters, 2018) by showing how diversity work is hindered when change agents all work for themselves.

Second, the absence of an organizational vision regarding diversity and inclusion hinders collaboration between change agents. Despite an overarching D&I policy, diversity change agents disagree about the meaning of diversity and inclusion. The structural and cultural compartmentalization further impedes formulating a shared vision on D&I. This was already highlighted by Kelan (2017), who showed that different change agents compete over who gets to define what gender equality is. Our research further adds that a lack of definition and vision hinders collaboration. Moreover, our analysis shows that diversity change agents negotiate the meaning and scope of D&I. We contribute to research on diversity change agents by challenging the assumption that change agents are necessarily knowledgeable actors regarding diversity and inclusion. Diversity change agents require knowledge on diversity, organizational power, and inequality (Van den Brink, 2020), but research has shown that they might not see it as a problem if they lack this expertise (Kirton et al., 2007). As Özturk et al. (2024) point out, studies on diversity change agents appear to operate under the assumption that these actors have sufficient knowledge on how to create transformative organizational change. Our findings show that many diversity change agents have limited

knowledge of intersectionality, and of what diversity and inclusion entail. This hinders collaboration, as they do not have a collective understanding of the object and goals of their work. More importantly, diversity change agents seem to be unaware of how this limited knowledge may not only create additional barriers to collaboration but may even perpetuate organizational inequalities (Adamson et al., 2021). When the scope of diversity is defined so broadly that it also includes those who are introverted or enjoy poetry, it becomes much easier to disregard issues such as discrimination and racism. Indeed, it may be more appealing to center one's diversity work on improving the inclusion of introverted employees, as this is less likely to result in organizational resistance.

Third, our findings show how responsibility and role allocation matter for the way diversity change agents relate to each other. We argue that uncertainty and disagreement regarding the allocation of responsibilities can hinder collaboration. Previous research has illustrated different roles for diversity change agents and suggests that these different actors all have a vital role to play in creating change. Top managers can champion diversity (Kelan & Wratil, 2018), while tempered radicals (Meyerson & Scully, 1995) use a small wins approach, and activists (Ahmed, 2023) are needed to push for more radical change. Yet, diversity change agents in our case see each other as competition instead of complementarity. The diversity networks and team D&I compete over the right to represent marginalized groups, instead of seeing how, using different angles and strategies, they can represent these groups more effectively together.

Additionally, we find lessons for how collaboration may be improved. Meier (2015) shows that well-defined demarcations between actors are necessary for successful collaboration. Our findings mainly show competitive boundary work in the form of competing over who gets to do what. Yet Meier demonstrates that competitive boundary work itself does not need to be problematic for collaboration. With a shared goal diversity change agents could clearly demarcate their different roles and responsibilities to improve their collaboration. From a practical perspective, we argue that a first step in fostering collaboration between change agents is to hire knowledgeable actors who are tasked with developing an organizational vision on diversity and inclusion. These actors should all have a clearly defined role, including how their role relates to and complements others. Finally, change agents should be actively encouraged to reach across organizational boundaries.

Our findings show that predominantly competitive and configurational boundary work has concrete consequences for doing diversity work in the organization. First, competition over responsibility and ownership reinforces the policy–implementation divide and results in fragmented and uneven D&I efforts: instead of jointly developing and translating priorities into feasible action, actors pursue separate agendas, contest each other's mandates, and repeatedly 'reinvent the wheel' across branches (see also Van den Brink, 2020). Second, competitive boundary work around representation and voice weakens coalition-building: rather than combining complementary forms of expertise and access, change agents spend scarce time and energy contesting representational legitimacy and collaborating mainly instrumentally (e.g., for resources), which limits sustained collective action. Third, configurational boundary work around the scope of D&I produces definitional uncertainty and coordination problems: while broader involvement could, in principle, disseminate D&I work across domains, the observed lack of coordination and shared vision makes it difficult to translate this breadth into coherent priorities and follow-through. Taken together, these dynamics do not only explain a lack of collaboration; they also help explain why D&I initiatives risk stalling, becoming inconsistent across units, or remaining largely symbolic rather than transformative.

In short, our study shows the irony of diversity change agents acting exclusionary while trying to create a more inclusive organization. The structural and cultural compartmentalization, and the absence of an organizational vision regarding diversity and inclusion results in change agents working mainly individually. The lack of clarity regarding the allocation of roles and responsibilities leads to change agents seeing each other as

competition instead of complementarity. This has important consequences for doing diversity work, because it makes it more difficult to combat organizational inequalities and create transformative change. Our findings illustrate the complex process of doing diversity work, as it needs to find a way to fit into an already existing organization. Consequently, organizations need to carefully consider the way they organize diversity work. We do not consider the dynamics of collaboration and competition observed in this study to be unique to the (Dutch) military. Other – especially large, complex, bureaucratic – organizations may also have a tendency to structurally and culturally compartmentalize, face limited knowledge amongst diversity change agents, and have unclear role allocation. Our study shows that the potential for collaboration between diversity change agents remains underutilized. Future research could study other cases in which multiple organizational members do diversity work within one organization to elaborate on the conditions under which collaboration between diversity change agents can be made possible.

Declaration of conflict of interests

The authors declare no conflicts of interest**.**

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