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ORIGINAL PAPER

"Doing the Right Thing" and "Making a Difference": The Role of Personal Ethical Values in Diversity and Inclusion Consulting

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Abstract
This article focuses on the salience of personal ethical values for diversity work. Theory and practice of diversity management (DM) are located in a wider business ethics agenda which acknowledges the rhetorical value of the business case for diversity, but which also integrates the moral responsibilities attached to people management. Drawing on findings from a qualitative study of external diversity and inclusion (D&I) consultants in the UK, the analysis reveals the extent to which personal ethical values act as motivators for and influences on DM work. The research finds that the unique positioning of external D&I consultants facilitates a *productive tension* towards their work with organizations, allowing them space and opportunity to navigate ethical tensions such that they stand as particularly valuable equality practitioners.

Keywords Diversity and inclusion · Consultants · Personal ethics · Social justice · Business case

Introduction

Diversity management (DM) is an area of organizational policy where dimensions can be readily identified that need to be discussed, to build awareness of the ethical responsibilities of organizations regarding the diverse workforce (Rabl et al., 2020). At a minimum, non-discrimination in people/human resource (HR) management is a moral obligation on the part of organizations (Demuijnck, 2009). However, arguably the prominence of the business case linking diversity initiatives to improvements in organizational performance has diluted the traditional social justice case premised on moral principles (Kaler, 2001; Liff & Dickens, 2000), which was formerly integral to organizational equality policies backed up by legislation. Given that neither legislation nor organizational policies grounded in the social justice case have proved sufficient to eliminate workplace inequalities, it is apposite to investigate the ethical bases of organizations' voluntary efforts towards inclusion under the auspices of DM (Demuijnck, 2009). Our study addresses this area of inquiry by exploring the salience of the personal ethical values of a sub-set of diversity practitioners—external diversity and inclusion (D&I) consultants.[1] In so doing, we respond to calls for researchers to investigate diversity practitioners' 'beliefs, opinions and awareness' with the aim of better illuminating the dynamics of organizational DM (Tatli & Ozbilgin, 2009, p. 256).

To situate the discussion of values and ethics within DM, Liff and Dickens (2000, p. 86) position the social justice case versus the business case; thus:

> [*the social justice case*] poses an argument that the justification for equality is that it is morally right and should be pursued for this reason… regardless of the costs or inefficiencies it occasions for business (reflecting a deontological perspective), against one [*the business case*] which argues that the goal of equality (the ethical 'good') can be better served by downplaying moral exhortations and instead stressing that equality action can serve organisational ends.

Reflecting on the business case justification, Van Dijk et al. (2012) argue that most organizations downplay moral

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[1] We use the label 'D&I consultant' here because this was how most of our interviewees described themselves.

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exhortations and are embedded in a utilitarian framework where of greatest value are competitive advantage, shareholder value and profitability. For these authors the shift from an equality approach to the business case rationale for diversity embodies this framework and has led to a stalemate situation for scholars and practitioners alike. The two 'cases'—social justice and business case, connected to deontological versus utilitarian ethical frameworks, offer contradictory logics for DM (Ahmed, 2007; van Dijk et al., 2012). However, it has long been argued that while theoretically opposing and hence presenting an apparent dilemma for DM practitioners, in practice the business case need not be at the expense of a social justice case (Liff & Dickens, 2000, p. 86) nor vice versa (Kaler, 2001). This is particularly so, if DM is located in a wider business ethics agenda rather than the business case being discursively positioned as merely about profitability or productivity (Greene & Kirton, 2009). As van Djik et al. (2012) argue, pro-diversity values are likely to enhance the social legitimacy of an organization which in turn may increase societal support for business goals. Moreover, equality activists have argued that equality is in the interests of business/organizations, even though for them the business case is merely an instrumental means to achieving moral ends (Kaler, 2001). Therefore, there is seemingly scope for DM practitioners to inject deontological principles into DM policy and practice, particularly if their personal ethical values 'compel' them to do so (Mease, 2015; Greene & Kirton, 2009). However, it is also important to acknowledge that in a business/organizational context, employees are thought of primarily as resources rather than human beings with rights and needs (van Dijk et al., 2012). Indeed, situational context forms the central focus within van Dijk et al.'s (2012) 'virtues and values perspective' on diversity which they argue can provide a solution to the incongruity between deontological and utilitarian perspectives reflected in social justice/business case dilemmas.

Supporting our specific focus on this sub-set of D&I practitioners, external consultants were at the vanguard of early developments in DM and arguably responsible for its global spread as a business-led approach. American management consultants (and academics) Thomas Cox and Roosevelt Thomas published some of the first pieces promulgating the now familiar appeal to organizations to pursue DM in the name of business interests rather than social justice (Cox & Blake, 1991; Thomas, 1990). In the UK, consultants also led the diffusion of a business-oriented DM approach, much hyped as replacing an allegedly failing social justice case organizational approach (Kandola & Fullerton, 1994; Ross and Schneider, 1992). D&I consultants potentially act as diversity policy and practice fashion setters (Oswick & Noon, 2014) and are therefore, responsible for the spread of diversity rhetoric as well as the mimetic policies identified across organizations (Prasad et al., 2011). Globally, organizations are increasingly using D&I consultants as part of the wider trend of HR outsourcing (Caruth et al., 2013). Indeed, there is debate in popular and industry journalism about the explosion of the D&I industry, of which consultancy is a part (e.g. Newkirk, 2019; Read, 2021; Tran, 2021; Zelevansky, 2019). D&I is a growth area particularly given the high-profile consequences for getting diversity wrong in the wake of the publicity produced by the BlackLivesMatter and #MeToo movements.

However, despite this wider context indicating their significance, we know very little about the actual work of external D&I consultants in the contemporary era when DM has become firmly established as the predominant policy paradigm. The lack of academic inquiry into this D&I industry explosion is exemplified by the fact that a 2003 figure of $8 billion per annum for corporate spend on D&I activities in the US (Kochan et al, 2003) is still frequently quoted some 20 years later (e.g. Read, 2021; Tran, 2021). Overall, there is a significant lack of knowledge about the architecture and value of this industry and its contribution to improving either business performance or addressing workplace inequalities.

While the DM literature provides some insights into the work of external D&I consultants, they are usually subsumed within a broader category of diversity practitioners which includes organizational diversity managers/advisors/officers/champions (for example Ahmed, 2017; Kirton & Greene, 2017; Litvin, 2002; Mease, 2015; Sinclair, 2006; Swan & Fox, 2010; Tatli, 2011). Given their early influence on the field, the rationale for exploring *external* D&I consultants as a discrete group is to understand what their outside organizational positioning means for DM practices, particularly when examined through the lens of their personal values. Facets of values and their relevance for professional identity and practice are explored in the broader management consulting literature and this focus is particularly apposite for D&I consulting. Indeed, as Shaw (2020, p. 21) discusses, there is a growing body of academic literature raising questions about the ethics of general management consulting practice. In direct relevance to DM literature, values are discussed most prominently in relation to their importance for those most senior in the organization, namely CEO commitment to championing D&I and promulgating a set of ethical principles for organizational policy and practice (Hood, 2003; Ng & Sears, 2020). A focus on the values of those who are more implicated in policy implementation including line managers as well as consultants is missing, even though such individuals are critical in the organizational progress or failure of DM (Greene & Kirton, 2009; Noon & Ogbonna, 2021). Further, the fact that diversity practitioners are often themselves members of socially marginalized groups is noted (Greene & Kirton, 2009; Kirton & Greene, 2019; Swan & Fox, 2010; Tatli, 2011), but not explored in-depth as to what it means for their values and further for their diversity work.

For example, we obviously cannot uncritically or necessarily assume that with such marginalized identities are attached a fixed or singular set of values that inevitably guide or even subtly imbue the work.

Therefore, our research focuses on exploring the personal ethical values of external D&I consultants. The articulation of basic principles within van Dijk et al.'s (2012) virtues and values perspective on diversity is useful, where 'values' denote what individual qualities (virtues) are held as most important in the given context (van Dijk et al., 2012: 80). In exploring the salience of the personal ethical values of external D&I consultants we ask the following questions: (i) do external D&I consultants perceive personal ethical values as underpinning their work and (ii) to what extent are personal ethical values manifest in their approaches to diversity work?

The article is structured as follows. First, there is a discussion of what is known from the literature about diversity practitioners and their work which considers why and how ethical values come into play. Second, the research methods and data analysis of our study are detailed. Third, we present our empirical findings addressing our two research questions. Finally, the conclusion draws out the conceptual and practical implications of the findings arguing that the unique positioning of external D&I consultants facilitates a *productive tension* towards their work with organizations, allowing them space and opportunity to navigate ethical tensions such that they stand as particularly valuable equality practitioners.

Diversity Practitioners and Their Work

Within the DM literature, main areas of enquiry are diversity discourses, organizational policies, and initiatives, and (especially in US research) contribution of workforce diversity and DM to organizational performance. A small number of studies focus specifically on diversity practitioners and exploring these reveals some coverage of personal values. For example, those which investigate diversity practitioners' underpinning conceptions, that is, what they understand DM to be, how they engage with competing discourses of diversity and in particular the tensions between the social justice and business cases (Kirton & Greene, 2019; Ahmed, 2007; Litvin, 2006; Mease, 2015). In some studies, diversity practitioners are found to uphold the business case for diversity and give more precedence to organizationally based definitions of diversity than ones based on histories of group oppression and inequalities. This pulling away by practitioners from morally based social justice arguments for diversity tends to result in a narrow performance-profit focused diversity agenda (Litvin, 2006; Mease, 2015; Van Dijk et al., 2012). Other studies identify diversity practitioners as experiencing tension, ambivalence, and frustration around the opposing 'cases' for diversity and explore how as organizational change agents, they negotiate their own inner dilemmas as well as organizational challenges to enact the kind of progressive change most of them seek (Ahmed, 2007; Kirton & Greene, 2019; Kirton et al., 2007; Swan & Fox, 2010; Tatli, 2011).

Other research focuses on ways in which diversity practitioners faced with this challenging context bring critical perspectives to their work (Ahmed, 2007; Mease, 2015; Sinclair, 2000). Social identity is often intricately connected to personal values and undoubtedly has a bearing on diversity work. This is unsurprising since the field's conceptual and professional roots lie in equality activism and diversity practitioners are typically people who may themselves have lived experiences of discrimination in working life and beyond. It is argued that in the past, equality practitioners would consciously and openly bring to their work those personal experiences of oppression and discrimination together with feminist, social justice, and equality values (Ahmed, 2007; Kirton & Greene, 2009; Swan & Fox, 2010). While social justice/equality activism was the hallmark of organizational equality practitioners formerly, no general pattern has been found in terms of human capital characteristics such as education, training, and work experience for contemporary diversity practitioners (Greene & Kirton, 2009; Tatli, 2011). Reflecting the business focus of DM as outlined earlier, in some studies they are found to have varied work backgrounds far beyond equality activism, including not only the obvious one of HR (where most are located), but also many different mainstream business functions and management roles (Kirton et al., 2007; Shapiro & Allison, 2007). Further, people are not necessarily full-time or career-long diversity practitioners. Some HR practitioners assume the D&I remit as part of their broader responsibilities; in some organizations people move in and out of the diversity practitioner role as part of a corporate career (Bertone & Abeynayake, 2019; Greene & Kirton, 2009; Tatli, 2011).

With the conceptual evolution of DM over time and the growing centrality of the business case, such personal values and identity-based experiences may now seem less relevant or legitimate as the foundations for diversity work. On the flipside, mainstream business experience may lend D&I practitioners much needed credibility and legitimacy with senior managers even if it does dilute a social justice agenda but meaning that today's diversity practitioners may gain more traction organizationally than their activist-oriented predecessors (Greene & Kirton, 2009). It is, thus, interesting to explore the extent to which personal ethical values still underpin and influence the work of D&I practitioners, where a social justice focus, and activism background are not so prevalent.

Still, we cannot avoid that the conceptual positioning of DM as a mainstream management/business concern has brought some dilemmas for diversity practitioners who hold

strong social justice values. Some studies find that diversity practitioners, even if they have broader business/management experience, feel that their personal values do not fully align with organizational diversity objectives focused solely or mainly on performance/productivity (Ahmed, 2007; Kirton & Greene, 2009; Litvin, 2006; Swan & Fox, 2010). If they are people who want to change the system, yet who also work within it, diversity practitioners are sometimes conceptualized as 'tempered radicals' who need to manage their own disaffection with their organizations while simultaneously trying to achieve some progressive step changes (Kirton et al., 2007; Meyerson & Scully, 1995; Swan & Fox, 2010). In a study of diversity practitioners in Australian universities, Ahmed (2007) found that while they use the business case when appealing to senior managers, for themselves, they tend to define diversity within a social justice framework which means that their personal agenda is more progressive and transformative than the business case that they publicly promulgate would imply. However, insisting on broader goals or drawing attention to the fault-lines that create workplace inequalities can make diversity practitioners unpopular with other organizational actors and can mean that they get consigned to the margins of mainstream strategy and policy making (Ahmed, 2007; Kirton et al., 2007).

Such an uneasy position vis-à-vis organizations/management might explain why some diversity practitioners choose to work as external consultants because although the central purpose as per the wider consulting industry is to improve client organizations' performance, outsider status alters the relational dynamic (Sturdy & Wright, 2008). Being an external consultant affords opportunities to change the system from another vantage point where it may be possible to transcend organizational inertia and challenge existing norms (Wright et al., 2012; Shaw, 2020) while avoiding formal organizational responsibility and accountability for outcomes (Sturdy, 2011). However, these advantages of external positioning may not be available to external D&I consultants to the same degree as other management consultants because diversity work is always at risk of being sidelined or sabotaged by those who perceive it as a distraction from 'real' business/organizational concerns. Therefore, long-term client engagements are likely to be crucial for critical external D&I consultants (Sinclair, 2006).

Because few studies focus on this sub-group of D&I practitioners, what lies behind the choice to go into external D&I consulting and the influence external organizational positioning and personal values have on the work is only cursorily explored. There are some notable exceptions. Litvin (2002) explores the compromises that US D&I consultants have to make to supply the 'product' their corporate clients want. Although she found a dissonance between their beliefs about what needed to be done and the more business-focused narrow objectives of their clients, the consultants ended up making compromises to keep clients satisfied. Similarly, Kirton and Greene (2009) also find that diversity practitioners in general (including consultants) are prepared to make such compromises as regards the fulfilment of social justice values. However, this is because they are not 'pure' equality activists, rather they are pragmatic people who sit easily within the neo-liberal diversity paradigm. Sinclair also acknowledges the drift towards compromise. She calls for a more radical approach from diversity practitioners, making a case for reflexive and critical diversity practice and a modus operandi that is conscious of power and "one's own capacity to either be co-opted or resist managerial and organizational urges to render diversity a tool to enhance control of 'the other'" (Sinclair, 2006, pp. 512–13). This has echoes in van Dijk et al. and and's (2012, p. 80) recognition of the importance of situational context (demands) and positional role of the actor within their virtues and values perspective.

Yet, it is easier said than done to adopt critical practice when social identity differences such as gender and race confer varying amounts of organizational power. This affects a professional community that is largely female and/or Black and minority ethnic, which inevitably impacts legitimacy vis-à-vis organizations (Ahmed, 2007; Tatli & Ozbilgin, 2009). In Ahmed's (2007, p. 247) words, diversity practitioners need to 'produce themselves' as credible and serious in the terms defined by organizations which means avoiding being seen as 'soft' which translates as having little value to the organization (see also Bertone & Abeynayake, 2019; Kirton et al, 2007). Swan and Fox (2010, p. 586) identify that action on the continuum of co-optation to resistance may be 'improvised' rather than chosen in the way that is often assumed in organizational change literature. Diversity practitioners' actions may be more about survival within their role than deliberate planned strategy based on values, reacting in the moment to their context in an attempt to achieve at least some—even if limited—progress towards social justice goals (Kirton & Greene, 2009). Whether or not such a piecemeal approach to change work can be successful is a moot point (Bertone & Abeynayake, 2019; Jones & Stablein, 2006).

To summarize, our review of literature on diversity practitioners and their work reveals a gap in knowledge firstly about external D&I consultants as a sub-group of diversity practitioners and secondly about the salience of personal ethical values within DM work. The former omission is important insofar as this specific sub-group of diversity practitioners appear to have an increasing influence globally on organizational DM. As regards the latter omission, following Ahmed (2007), we argue that we need to know more about what DM *can do,* in particular, whether the business case premise can advance a progressive agenda if key practitioners' values point in that direction. For this, we believe that we need to know more about what motivates

diversity practitioners in their work. Organizational context (e.g. institutional commitment, resources made available for diversity work, diversity climate, etc.) is highly important for DM, but acknowledging this does not negate the need for deeper understanding of key D&I actors and the influence of their personal values on this field of practice that has its roots in social justice values, but which has undergone a paradigmatic shift away from moral purpose. In this way, our inquiry can speak directly to debates within business ethics, by contributing new knowledge about the intersection between a particular location of management practice, namely D&I consulting, and ethical values and the potential for their enactment.

Methods and Data Analysis

Context

The article's discussion is based on empirical fieldwork in the UK carried out in 2016. The UK has a long history of equality legislation and organizational equality policies extending across a range of issues. Against longstanding efforts to address inequalities, UK organizations, like those of other countries, 'imported' the concept, rhetoric, and language of DM from the USA (Jones & Stablein, 2006). Widespread organizational espousal of the 'business case' for diversity occurred rapidly backed by government which seems to have distracted from previous longstanding efforts focused on a social justice case (Greene & Kirton, 2009). For example, there are indications that despite its superficial business-friendliness, DM is not a priority for the business community and that managers have little understanding of DM and are in fact sceptical about the business benefits (Kirton et al., 2016; Sinclair, 2006). Thus, the promises of diversity rhetoric are by no means always matched by organizational commitment by way of resources let alone the experiential reality of employees. It is in this context of ambivalence surrounding DM that UK D&I consultants operate.

Methods

Initially, we carried out a scoping survey of websites from which we identified around 20 high-profile UK-based diversity consultancies/consultants whom we approached to take part in an interview. We then used a snowballing strategy to recruit additional participants. When scoping the project, we found no large management consultancy firms in the UK providing specialist D&I consulting and early interviews with a couple of longstanding consultants confirmed that in the UK D&I consulting is most typically provided by solo consultants and small consulting firms. The eventual interview sample of 28 comprised 12 solo consultants, one consultancy employee and 15 small consultancy owners. The total sample included 17 white women; 15 minority ethnic women; four white men and two minority ethnic men. In addition, six participants self-identified as LGBT.

The authors conducted the semi-structured interviews lasting 60–75 min yielding around 35 h of sound files and 430 pages of transcripts. The majority were conducted face-to-face with a small number by telephone. It should be noted that the authors have a long track record in research in the equality and diversity space, particularly looking at DM practitioners (Greene & Kirton, 2009; Kirton & Greene, 2019). The interview guide drew on this prior research, covering: career background; career strategies; current/recent work; views on the meaning of diversity; consultant-client relationships; and stakeholder involvement in D&I. The interviews asked open questions about motivations for going into D&I consulting and how interviewees approached their work, probing views around personal commitment to diversity and inclusion, moral purpose, and the salience of social identity for their work.

Methodological Positioning and Analysis

Our research approach is interpretive (Burrell & Morgan, 1979) where knowledge is viewed as subjectively constructed through lived experiences based on individual interpretations and subjective sense making. We have used what the interview participants say as the basis for claims about the nature and salience of their personal ethical values regarding their DM work. Although exceptions in the data are highlighted, analysis was primarily focused on the existence of shared meanings or 'interpretive repertoires' (Potter, 1996). We can only offer interpretation of their self-reporting of the salience of their values along with examples of their practice. Empirical inquiry of their 'actual' practice in client organizations to compare with self-reported views and attitudes was not part of our research.

NVIVO software was used as an electronic repository for the interviews, and through which thematic analysis was conducted. NVIVO is a ubiquitously used software package for management research and widely available in UK universities. As an example, Trigueros-Cervantes et al. (2018, p. 382) highlight the advantages of NVIVO 'as a complete bank of work put at the disposal of the "qualitative bricoleur"', allowing easy manipulation of qualitative data sets, where the importance of the traditional role of the qualitative researcher is maintained but within a more convenient electronic form.

We coded and recoded the interview data using several broad a priori nodes from the interview guide which were utilized as initial themes. These were then supplemented with sub-nodes developed after preliminary reading and discussion

Table 1 Example of coding book

Node	Sub node	Number of sources coded against the sub node	Number of coded references within the sub node
Background	*Sub Node 1.1 Career History*: Information about work experience, organizational roles, skills, and expertise	28	48
	Sub Node 1.2 Motivation for D&I consultancy: Personal journey, rationale for career change	28	51
D&I Career Perspectives	*Sub Node 2.1 Perspectives on D&I industry and careers:* Personal positioning within the field, views on the nature and purpose of the industry	23	39
	Sub Node 2.2 Legitimacy as a D&I consultant: Reflections on what qualifies them for the D&I role, personal experiences, activist activities	22	32
Perspectives on D&I paradigm	*Sub Node 3.1 Personal:* including reflection on social justice versus business case, moral positioning	28	70
	Sub Node 3.2 Views of the client: including reflections on areas of tension or conflict	25	39
Consultant role	*Sub Node 4.1 Relationships with clients, successes and challenges*	26	54
	Sub Node 4.2 Personal positioning vis a vis the client: including actions taken to align practice with values	24	50
	Sub Node 4.3 Business model: Nature of the consultancy business, financing, marketing	28	71
Practices	*Sub Node 5.1 Client priorities and foci*	27	63
	Sub Node 5.2 D&I activities in practice	28	91
	Sub Node 5.3 Views of working with organizational stakeholders	27	42
	Sub Node 5.4 Views of working with non-management stakeholders	23	30

between the co-authors of the transcripts and initial coded excerpts (See Table 1 for a summary of the coding book). The latter step enabled us to identify sub-themes from the dataset itself ensuring that we did not adhere too rigidly to our a priori nodes. For example, within the initial node 'Perspectives on the D&I paradigm' we were then able to develop and code against sub-nodes of 'Personal values' and 'Views of the client' which emerged directly from the interview data itself.

Research Findings

We structure our findings presentation around the two research questions set out in the introduction, utilizing illustrative verbatim quotations from interview respondents which have been pseudonymised to protect anonymity.

Do Ethical Personal Values Underpin Consultants' DM Work?

We were interested in understanding *whether* and *what* personal ethical values were held by D&I consultants and the ways in which these informed the diversity career choice as well as approaches to their work. We have split these findings into two sections, the first presents narratives around their personal and professional backgrounds in which personal ethical values emerged as important, and the second looks at the way these personal ethical values affected their motivations for doing DM work.

Salience of Personal and Professional Background

As described in the methods section, the interviewees all had marginalized social identities, but little to no social justice activist profile. Nevertheless, for many, their own social identity (and the experiences of exclusion, disadvantage, discrimination that attached to it) was one of the most important factors motivating them either to go into diversity work in the first place or to stay in it and shift to external consulting, for example:

> [People] often get into it because they've been directly affected by it themselves and it gets into that thing in the core of your being about this just isn't fair… So

> quite a lot of us tend to end up in it because we've got some sort of direct experience. (Luke)

Professionally, as with management consultants in general (Sturdy & Wright, 2008), the D&I consultants had wider-ranging business and management experience. Collectively, they had worked in the private, public, and non-profit sectors in a range of industries including oil, utilities, advertising, professional services, retail, military, banking, publishing, education, civil service, local authorities, police service, IT, media, and communications. Most individuals had a breadth of experience in different professional, management, and organizational roles—very often in HR, and equality and diversity, but also various other business and organizational functions. All interviewees had been able to utilize their prior business and professional networks to secure work as external D&I consultants. Importantly, while not all had held a prior full-time organizational D&I role, all interviewees had some level of D&I experience immediately before becoming an external diversity consultant. This is important to understanding their positionality in that this means that they were able to directly compare their experience of doing D&I work in an organizational role with that of being an external consultant.

Some of the interviewees were in a privileged position regarding income security and/or career seniority which allowed them considerable choice around the career shift to consultancy. Five interviewees had moved into D&I consultancy after redundancy or early retirement; three had made the move to accommodate family and work-life-balance considerations; others had become mortgage free which opened the option to shift to less predictable income. The ability to make ('a lot of') money was at the bottom of the list for many and indeed across the whole interview sample, there was no expectation that there was 'big' money to be made in D&I consulting. It should be noted that for a couple of earlier career stage interviewees, being a consultant was a struggle financially and some were considering or had already decided to take on an additional part-time salaried job. Nevertheless, most indicated that they made a satisfactory living, and some stated that they had more work offers than they had time and resources to accept. This is another context factor important to understanding the positionality of consultants. It is now interesting to explore the extent to which these background features—career trajectory, financial considerations/circumstances and social identity-based experiences—were entwined with personal ethical values that in turn influenced their D&I work.

Personal Ethical Values as Motivation for D&I Work

First, it is important to acknowledge that it is possible for people to hold certain values (e.g. social justice, equality) but not see them as having much to do with their professional work. In line with extant literature, even though most interviewees in our study did not have what we would classify as a social justice activist profile, we did find that their personal values typically had a strong bearing on their motivation for diversity work:

> I mean, I do have very strong personal values around equality. I wouldn't do this, absolutely wouldn't do this if I didn't. (Stella)

A few interviewees hinted at a higher purpose by explicitly stating that they were not motivated by money, but by wanting to utilize their past experience in a career where they would have the opportunity to effect progressive change in organizational cultures:

> The last eleven years [as a consultant] have been brilliant, being your own boss and all of that. But the topic of D&I, I think is another layer which adds to the sense of fulfilment because you know, I do feel that I am actually making a difference. (Georgia)

Furthermore, the privileged position (regarding income, financial security, and professional seniority) that many interviewees were in allowed them space to be selective about consulting projects matching their values. For example, although immediately prior to retirement Beatrice had been a diversity manager in a large company, her longer career history was in corporate HR. After retirement it was D&I consulting specifically that appealed to her:

> I've got a pension, so I don't really need to work. But if something sits with my values and I feel like I can add value to that project then I will. So, I do want to be paid but I am in the lucky position that I can pick and choose, and I will pick those that fit with my own values.

For many consultants the career move into external consulting was entwined with interest/passion in D&I that related to strong ethical values. Those values often created a misalignment with corporate values and working styles, which prompted some consultants to leave corporate careers where they had experienced a continual need to defend and justify diversity work by reference to the business case:

> I lost the will to live to be absolutely honest because my life just constantly became a sales pitch to chief executives of why they had to get behind this, why it was important and why it was going to have an impact on their business. (Susan)
>
> I realise how I didn't fit in with that organisation and the whole of my working practice was a compromise really. I was… occasionally in deep water … you

> know, because I had stuck to a principled position, which was not acceptable. (Frances)

Working as an independent consultant from the outside felt liberating for many as they were able to work only with organizations that they deemed willing to listen to moral exhortations and to invest in diversity initiatives because it was the right thing to do. We come back to this issue in the next section where the ways that participants mobilized ethical values in their D&I consultancy work are discussed.

Reflecting a values-driven motivation, despite the need to talk up the business benefits of diversity in order to win consulting contracts, some of the consultants who had been in diversity work for many years remained resolutely employee-centred in terms of what they wanted to achieve, rather than focused on organizational performance per se. Promoting diversity as being beneficial to a wide range of employees and stakeholders was seen to be the next evolution of D&I and explained why many consultants were keen to add 'inclusion' to the lexicon (see discussion in next section). Contrastingly some of those more recent to diversity work emphasized how they worked for their clients (construed as senior management) rather than in the interests of their employees. Whichever of these positions was taken, reflecting a utilitarian ethical perspective (van Dijk et al., 2012), there was a widely shared belief across the interview sample that a more inclusive workplace was a better workplace that would deliver benefits for all stakeholders as well as the organization itself:

> And it really, really matters… I want that to come across that it matters to me personally. But I think it has the potential to bring enormous benefits to organisations and the people who work in them. (Barbara)
> You know, I have a fundamental belief that organizations work better and are more productive and effective when they have greater diversity and can make that diversity work for them. (Stella)

Operating in a State of Values Ambivalence

Interviews included conversations on understandings of the meaning of equality and diversity. Some consultants in our sample had a long history in the field—up to 30 years—and remembered the days of 'equal opportunities' and the beginnings of organizational policy-making in this area. Those newer to the field were less familiar with the 'older' concepts and approaches. All interviewees now used the term D&I, however, which as discussed in the last section, was deeply connected with their moral commitment to social justice. We found that D&I consultants did not perceive that their personal values around social justice and equality clashed entirely with the business-focused objectives of organizations, provided clients had a genuine moral commitment to inclusion (Demuijnck, 2009) as these two examples illustrate:

> I think it's important that the… diversity consultant is alive to that and yes, plays ball on inclusion because I do think inclusion is a really important way to go, but [it] doesn't let people off the hook for things they might find more inconvenient and difficult to deal with. (Felix)
> The starting point is a broad interpretation of diversity. Although there I do find myself on slightly uncomfortable ground… I do think that there are some differences that may have more of an impact than others. So… I am still personally interested in those differences which are prescribed by law because I think those are really huge. (Barbara)

This ambivalent positioning hints at what Sinclair (2006) sees as the diversity practitioner's contradictory desires to belong to a professional group and mainstream organization and yet to subvert and challenge the putatively unfair system to make a difference.

The interviewees' take on the salience of social identities and personal experiences of discrimination for their work also speaks to this ambivalence. Many interviewees rejected the idea that it was their identity that 'qualified' them for diversity work. Some even found it mildly insulting, feeling this implied that almost anyone from a marginalized group could do D&I work without any business/organizational knowledge/expertise:

> …most of the diversity consultants that make a… living from it have had really professional careers beforehand where they're able to evidence the range of their experience …. people do it an injustice by almost viewing it as not a profession and it's like well, anyone can be … I mean, if you're gay, if you're trans, if you've got an equality group, you can just pick it up and become a diversity consultant. (Heather)

This concern also reflects recognition of the dangers of diversity work being marked as activist territory; that is, the work risks being devalued if it becomes strongly politicized, gendered, and racialized (c.f. Ahmed, 2007; Sinclair, 2006; Tatli, 2011). Thus, perhaps in a bid for recognition of their subject matter expertise, many consultants stressed that their identity was very much in the background rather than centred in any obvious way in their diversity work. However, in whichever way they framed their motivations and the appeal of being a diversity consultant, all interviewees expressed a strong passion for "doing the right thing" and for "making a difference" suggesting that ethical values are critical.

Are Personal Ethical Values Manifest in Their Approaches to Diversity Work?

Social justice/equality values were integral to how most interviewees went about their work and what they sought to achieve. There was, thus, considerable potential for tension to exist between their work being a professional field (requiring skills and competencies acquired through education, training, and experience) and being values-driven work (requiring backgrounds and characteristics more commonly associated with activism such as social justice campaigning/advocacy and socially marginalized identity). To explore this further, we move on to look at their practices, focusing on what D&I consultants say they *do* with their personal values and how these are manifest in their goals and approaches to their work.

Fundamentally, the opportunity to "make a real difference" was extremely important for interviewees and emphasized many times. Some were very conscious that their personal ethical values not only motivated them but also imbued their work. Being an external consultant, as opposed to an internal D&I practitioner, afforded more opportunity to put their ethical values into practice, something which began when negotiating consulting projects:

> … if there's an organization that doesn't have a good ethical slant to it, I'm not going to do it and I have said to clients or potential clients, please don't ask us to come and help you recruit a more diverse population into an organization that is unhealthy and unfair, I'm not going to do it (Roberta)

In fact, wanting to "do the right thing" meant that most consultants selectively turned down work where they felt there would be no real opportunity to effect change, where organizations appeared motivated merely by the need to be seen to be doing something ("window dressing" or "box ticking" as they typically put it) rather than by high ethical standards:

> We pulled a five-year plan together… and after a year they still hadn't done what they needed to do within the six-month period. And I challenged them around that and effectively their chief exec got cold feet, so I just said I didn't think it was good use of their money or my time for us to carry on working together if they weren't committed to delivering the plan… So, I won't work with organizations that just want to tick boxes. (Susan)

Additionally, interviewees sought to cultivate long-term relationships with clients, which not only provided a degree of financial security but also better enabled them to effect worthwhile change (i.e. to make a difference) focused on organizational structures and processes rather than merely on individual behaviours. With long-term clients, consultants could offer the latest fashionable consulting interventions such as unconscious bias training (focusing on individual behaviours), but within holistic programmes (aiming for structural change) implemented over a long period. This avoided being complicit in "ticking boxes", thus, preserving their personal values and desire 'to do the right thing'.

Once working with clients, most interviewees declared being able to be more challenging than they felt internal D&I practitioners could be. They attributed this to the fact that they had no deep personal investment in client organizations, nor did they have to be mindful of any potentially negative effects on their own career. Many spoke of being "comfortable with a position of challenge", and of the advantages of being in an external position from where they could "speak truth to power":

> …. it's a very privileged position to be an external consultant where you can go in and talk to the CEO or the HR Director and cut through the internal organizational politics. (Frank)

Heather talked about deliberately being "constructively disruptive"—which she and others saw as central to being impactful and making a difference as an external D&I consultant. Some interviewees highlighted how they were less susceptible to the subtle pressures of co-optation to the managerial agenda experienced as an internal diversity practitioner:

> …when I was on the inside I did think very seriously before I said to my senior leaders what I actually thought about their behaviours and what they were doing. Whereas being external, what's the worst that can happen to me? … So, I am more open to giving very clear and directive feedback to senior leaders. (Susan)

Holding a position of challenge was not always easy, however, and while there was clearly scope for personal values to shape the work, a small number of interviewees who were the most conscious of being out-of-step with business-driven values felt it necessary to tone down the visibility of their social justice values in the professional space. Thus, they walked a tightrope between acting on personal values and concealing those same values to sustain credibility and legitimacy with clients.

Referring to the widely held ideal of trying to ensure that a broad group of stakeholders was involved in their D&I work, for many interviewees co-creating change programmes was an important moral obligation of D&I consulting and a litmus test of their commitment to ethical values:

> We would always suggest to the organization, one of the first recommendations would be that you'd set up a steering group or working party or a committee or a forum… And on that forum would be that cross range of

> stakeholders. So, you'd always be working with a cross-organizational group of stakeholders in order to deliver. So, the governance of a D&I programme …. one of the considerations is how do you bring all the stakeholders into the governance of a D&I project. (Georgia)

For some interviewees, involving a wide range of stakeholders was not merely a question of the organization's moral responsibility in a deontological sense, it also served the utilitarian purpose of helping to ensure a successful project:

> You're thinking all the time with any massive change who are the key stakeholders, who are the key players? … everything from the board, the executive team, the individual senior leaders, the next layers of leaders. You're talking about all the different HR people; you're talking about CSR people down to individuals. And indeed, as well, where relevant, you're talking also about what is the role that trade unions might play or works councils in different parts of the world. Anybody, who can have an influence. Internal networks, formal and informal. It's a kind of complicated jigsaw puzzle of players who can influence this positively or negatively that you have to bear in mind all the time I think. (Beth)

A few consultants took their commitment to involving stakeholders to a sophisticated level of practice, deliberately engaging in processes of 'partnership' with all levels/layers of the organization:

> I think co-creation is really important because otherwise it's imposed, isn't it, there is no buy-in. So, the co-creation I mean… it was over a period of six months working with about 500 colleagues in groups of ten to fifteen in a room, what, why, how, post-it notes, co-creation, you know, education as well as input, review …. It was a genuinely co-created strategy… It's not a kind of facile exercise of appeasing or trade union consulting. It's genuinely, what's the best ideas from up here and what's the best ideas from down here and how does it all genuinely all work together for the best." (Felix)

The commitment to "co-creation" came from an ethical-moral (deontological) position of it being the right thing to do for individual consultants as well as organizations to include as many different voices as possible, but it was also premised on the (utilitarian) moral belief that co-creation delivers better solutions for all stakeholders.

Discussion and Conclusions

Previous research has explored how D&I practitioners engage with different equality and diversity discourses, namely the social justice and business cases (Kirton & Greene, 2019; Swan and Fox, 2010; Tatli, 2011), but not how they mobilize personal ethical values in their actual work in pursuit of social justice, which is pertinent to investigate to understand what DM means in context (Ahmed, 2007). Moreover, despite apparent growth in the D&I consulting market, suggesting that it is likely having considerable influence on organizational DM, external D&I consulting is under-researched. Our research specifically addresses this empirical gap.

From this, personal ethical values emerged as highly salient, influencing both thought and action in terms of consultants' work with client organizations. The fact that we find that D&I consultants say that their work is influenced by their ethical values is notable (and not empirically established before) but is not necessarily surprising (although arguably it might set them apart from other consultants within management consultancy more broadly (Shaw, 2020)). However, our analysis also interrogates the ethical values held by these individuals more closely and specifically in relation to the predominant diversity policy approaches within which they are expected to engage. D&I consultants' values were to one degree, or another rooted in a deontological principle that argues that people should not be treated merely as a means to an end (van Dijk et al., 2012). Thus, while the discourse of diversity may lack a moral compass (Kaler, 2001; Tatli, 2011), we found that this group of key diversity practitioners who mobilize it in their work do not leave their personal ethical values outside their clients' doors.

This led to specific tensions for the D&I consultants in navigating being in a professional field where the work and its goals are closely linked to organizational objectives reflecting a utilitarian perspective, and a values-driven field reflecting a deontological ethical paradigm (van Dijk et al., 2012). Reflecting on this tension in order to understand it better and its implications for their DM work, the interviewees were quite clear that while they regarded D&I *primarily* as a professional field requiring subject expertise that they could use in pursuit of business objectives, it was also one where their personal ethical values were ever-present to varying degrees, ensuring that their work would seek to produce positive outcomes for employees and other stakeholders too. Their commitment to co-creation and stakeholder involvement exemplified this ethical stance.

Moreover, previous scholarship has suggested that the bringing of personal values to DM work is critical for the change agency of diversity practitioners within organizations (Kirton & Greene, 2019; Sinclair, 2006; Swan & Fox, 2010). Our research concurs with this, but importantly additionally highlights the intersection of personal ethical values with professional identity and organizational positioning. Most of the external D&I consultants in our study had given up on the within-organizational career because

of the way that it constrained them in the ethical project of "doing the right thing" and "making a real difference" that was viewed as integral to their professional identity and its moral dimension. In examining diversity work as emanating from equality activism, Swan and Fox (2010) argue that insofar as diversity professionals are individuals whose personal beliefs adhere with their professional identities, they inevitably experience conflict and tension—a position of tempered radicalism (see also Kirton et al, 2007; Meyerson & Scully, 1995). Our study of external D&I consultants challenges this assumption, which might indicate that the field itself (including those who work in it) is changing or that the positioning facilitated specifically by being an external D&I consultant provides a different vantage point from which to do diversity work. That is, one that offers more scope for being selective about the organizations they work with, with external consultants selecting those organizations with high ethical standards and moral commitment to diversity and inclusion to begin with.

Yet even for external D&I consultants, there is a delicate balance to maintain given that evidence and argument suggest that most organizations lack strong moral commitment to DM (Kirton & Greene, 2019; Kaler, 2001; Van Djick et al., 2012). D&I consultants obviously cannot be too radical or disruptive to alienate too many clients, actual and potential, upon whom they are dependent for their income. However, our interviewees clearly felt that being liberated from the strictures of organizational politics afforded freedom to act more strategically in a way that fitted with their personal ethical values and without the same perceived need to temper their claims as did diversity practitioners within organizations (Kirton et al., 2007).

Fundamentally, within the context of debate within the business ethics field about the contradictory logics for DM (van Dijk et al, 2012), the morally based social justice case was not juxtaposed against the utilitarian business case for diversity for most of our interviewees. Indeed, on the contrary, they seemed to believe that the two cases were not irreconcilable in practice or at least not as regards the clients they chose to work with (c.f. Greene & Kirton, 2009; Liff & Dickens, 2000). Although they expected, indeed demanded moral commitment from their clients, the external D&I consultants did empathize strongly with business goals and acknowledged that such imperatives might at times conflict with pursuit of morally based diversity goals. Moreover, they wanted to make and be recognized for making, contributions to mainstream business goals that their clients would value (and pay for), which resonates with the utilitarian perspective that most organizations subscribe to (van Dijck et al., 2012; Kaler, 2001). Most of them deeply believed that attention to diversity goals would improve organizational performance, taking their held personal values out of the simply binary between deontological and utilitarian ethical frameworks. This position of ambivalence inevitably resulted in some tension with their personal values. However, our broader argument is that this has positive, productive dimensions, leading them to make critical and challenging diagnoses of clients' problems, to suggest controversial interventions, or even to turn down clients/projects they deemed unworthy of their time and effort where they could not "do the right thing" or "make a difference".

Thus, the way in which the personal values of the D&I consultants were mobilized in their work was within the specific context of their own positioning in relation to their clients-in other words, a 'context-dependent' value system. In van Dijk et al.'s (2012) terms, this meant that their consulting practice was related to the specifics of circumstances, which sometimes demanded compromises. For example, delivery of unconscious bias training, which most consultants were extremely sceptical about, but within a broader change programme that satisfied their ethical values. We have highlighted how this ethical positioning was made possible first by a place of personal and professional privilege in which many D&I consultants are located, especially in comparison with organizational D&I practitioners. The switch to a consultancy career was often made at a point of financial security and after building a professional reputation, which allowed them space to act more in alignment with their personal ethical values. Second, this ethical positioning was made possible because the organizational location of external D&I consultants facilitates a *productive tension* towards their work with organizations, enabling them to invoke business language, but at the same time be "constructively disruptive", pushing back against "ticking boxes", offering interventions that fit with their personal ethical values or walking away.

Our research makes a specific contribution to the field of business ethics by illuminating and stimulating new knowledge and ideas about the intersection between a particular location of management practice, namely D&I consulting, and ethics. Our research findings offer empirical examples of how it feels for D&I consultants at the centre of these productive ethical tensions within organizational practice. In a context where outsourcing of HR functions is extensive and use of consultants in areas like DM is increasing, our findings are significant in indicating that the outsourcing of D&I work might have important potential to infuse the organizational DM agenda with a deontological moral rationale rather than have the negative effect of merely perpetuating a utilitarian business case rationale as suggested by previous research (Litvin, 2002).

In conclusion, it is important to acknowledge the limitations of our study: we recognise that we draw on a relatively small sample of external D&I consultants whom we asked to self-report views and retrospective experiences. Research on consultants' work would benefit from gathering the client

organization perspective and this is something that future studies might usefully consider. It would also be useful to track consultants over time in their interaction with clients perhaps by adding participant observation to the methods. Equally, it would be useful to interview line managers and other management stakeholders in client organizations to understand their perspective on the impact of consultants' work. While making these suggestions, we also highlight the strengths of our research approach which are a product of the sample we managed to gather: all consultants had previously held organizational D&I roles, which gave them a broad and deep understanding of how organizations tackle DM; interviewees had had varied careers and a good understanding of business objectives; and they were a demographically diverse group with a range of socially marginalized identities. These attributes meant that they were able to offer deep insights into this values-driven consulting field where the capacity "to make a difference" and "do the right thing" is fundamental to both professional identity and professional practice. Thus, we have shown that the business case for diversity has not won the hearts and minds of this group of critical actors, which provides some hope to those who believe retaining the moral purpose of diversity work is important.

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