Telling and selling the value of diversity and inclusion – external consultants’ discursive strategies and practices

Abstract

Based on a qualitative study of a sub-group of diversity professionals, external diversity and inclusion (D&I) consultants, we explore D&I consultants’ discursive strategies and practices situated within organisational structures, relations and interactions of power and knowledge. Theoretically, the research reveals how D&I consultants’ own discursive strategies interact with existing organizational and societal discourses of diversity, incrementally shaping their continual evolution. A classification is developed which sets out four approaches taken by consultants with regard to their discursive strategies in relation to clients. The findings suggest that HR practitioners need to work in tandem with external consultants to develop strategies to improve the status and legitimacy of diversity work if the field is to progress the organisational D&I agenda.

Key words

Diversity management; diversity and inclusion consultants; discourse; discursive strategies; diversity professionals

Introduction

External diversity and inclusion (D&I) consultants potentially act as diversity policy and practice fashion setters across sectors, industries and organisations (Oswick and Noon, 2014). They are, therefore, responsible for the continuing spread of diversity rhetoric and mimetic policies (Prasad et al., 2011). However, we know little about how external consultants persuade organisations to buy their diversity services because they are typically only a tiny proportion of research participants in a small number of studies (Greene and Kirton, 2009; Mease, 2015). This omission is surprising given the diversity policy paradigm grew out of consulting in the USA (Cox and Blake, 1991) and there are indications that their numbers are increasing. Existing research on the broader category of diversity professionals indicates that change agency is constrained by a culture of organisational undervaluing of diversity work (e.g. Greene and Kirton, 2009; Tatli and Ozbilgin, 2009). However, existing literature does not explore how this culture affects external D&I consultants specifically and what strategies they deploy to navigate and counter it during consulting interactions before they even enter organisations. This article contributes to knowledge of diversity professionals' work, drawing on a qualitative study of UK-based external D&I consultants' discursive strategies and practices. The article's overarching research question is, how do external D&I consultants 'tell and sell' the value of their work to clients? Two sub-questions informed by extant literature and our empirical research are then addressed: (i) what organisational barriers do D&I consultants perceive as impacting upon their work, and (ii) what discursive ideas and strategies inform how they seek to work with, and self-position vis-à-vis clients in order to overcome barriers and undertake their work?

Next, we turn to existing diversity literature to outline briefly the evolution of diversity theory and practice and to position diversity professionals and their work as operating in an

undervalued consulting sub-field. We then describe the research fieldwork, data analysis and the UK diversity management context. In the findings section, we demonstrate that external D&I consultants are an influential sub-group of diversity professionals, encountering multiple constraints in exercising agency, producing challenges, dilemmas and tensions. Most notably, D&I consultants display strong personal commitment to equality, diversity and inclusion that is sometimes at odds with organisational rationales for diversity work centred on the business case, but they continually attempt to enact such via their own praxis. A descriptive classification is developed which sets out four approaches taken by consultants with regard to their discursive strategies in relation to clients. Finally, the conclusion draws out the conceptual and practical implications of the findings.

Diversity management and diversity professionals – linking theory and practice

Evolution of a concept

The historical dimension of discourses aids understanding of contemporary practices (Marsh, 2009). The diversity concept/discourse was a practitioner-led response to the 1980s backlash in the USA against the social justice aims of affirmative action (see Lorbiecki and Jack, 2000 and Noon, 2007), which organisations widely considered either of little help or counter-productive (Kelly and Dobbin, 1998). Diversity shifted the focus from the moral concern for combating discrimination and disadvantage experienced by socially marginalised groups (largely women and black and minority ethnic (BME) people) to an expanded notion of workforce diversity encompassing myriad individual differences, and diversity policies for the sake of business imperatives and goals (e.g. improving competitiveness, profitability and productivity).

Scholars have critically interrogated the discourse of diversity and exposed its many flaws and limitations. In particular, the business case has attracted much opprobrium for unproven and hollow claims, failure to render diversity management a high organisational priority, and inability to deliver the promised transformation of organisational culture (Bendick and Egan, 2010; Foster and Harris, 2005; Greene and Kirton, 2009; Lorbiecki and Jack, 2000). Part of the problem is an organisational policy-practice gap (Kirton et al., 2015) caused in part by diversity work's location in HR, meaning that initiatives suffer from lack of managerial legitimacy, while middle/line manager resistance fosters a culture of undervaluing diversity (Foster and Harris, 2005; Sinclair, 2006; Tatli, 2011). Yet, organisations continue to work on diversity partly due to need to comply with anti-discrimination legislation and partly due to isomorphic pressure to be seen to be doing something in an era when corporate social responsibility and business ethics are compelling parallel discourses (Greene and Kirton, 2009; Litvin, 2002). The recent linguistic shift of tacking on 'inclusion' responds to one aspect of the critique of the business case. Conceptually, 'inclusion' softens the potentially negative connotations of the business case and discursively accords renewed legitimacy for diversity initiatives within a broader social purpose (Oswick and Noon, 2014: 26; Greene and Kirton, 2009).

Diversity professionals

Within this complex, evolving discursive context, diversity professionals are responsible for designing, commissioning, purveying, implementing and monitoring organisational diversity initiatives. The small existing body of research on diversity professionals has exposed several recurrent themes. The work carries career costs (e.g. stress, marginalisation, isolation), as well as benefits (e.g. greater organisational influence and career development opportunities) (Kirton and Greene, 2009). Barriers exist to professionals' change agency (Kirton et al.,

2007; Tatli and Ozbilgin, 2009; Tatli, 2011), including management disengagement/resistance, lack of resources and organisational regimes of inequality. Diversity professionals' engagement with diversity discourses, in particular social justice versus business case aims, is also closely examined (Ahmed, 2007; Litvin, 2002; Mease, 2016; Prasad et al. 2011; Sinclair, 2006; Swan and Fox, 2010). Our study contributes to these debates by focusing explicitly on D&I consultants' discursive strategies vis-à-vis clients, which we argue constitute an important component of their change agency.

First, it is worth considering the wider contemporary discursive context within which diversity professionals operate. While the business case has undoubtedly influenced this field of professional practice, the field's origins in the social justice activism of historically marginalised groups has left a legacy. Managing the demands of social justice and business goals is a defining feature of diversity work (Mease, 2015: 60) as reflected in Kirton et al.'s (2007) positioning of diversity professionals as 'tempered radicals' – individuals who work within mainstream organisations but who also seek progressive social change. Further, roots in social justice activism are still manifest insofar as it is typical for diversity professionals to be women or BME men who bring personal experiences of marginalisation, under-representation and discrimination (Greene and Kirton, 2009). These frame diversity professionals' practice, but may also contribute to organisational undervaluing of D&I work that they have to continually push back on (Tatli and Ozbilgin, 2009; Sinclair, 2006; Tatli, 2011).

Diversity professionals' identity characteristics and personal experiences also influence the relational context. While there might be a positive effect on perceptions of credibility and legitimacy among organisational stakeholders such as employees and trade unions (Kirton et al., 2007), there might be a negative effect on senior managers. Influenced by the business

case discourse, the latter may be more persuaded if diversity professionals have business and management experience - which many now do (Kirton and Greene, 2009; Shapiro and Allison, 2007), but even this might be mitigated by minority identities. For example, Thomas's (2008) account of the paradox he faced as a business-oriented African-American diversity consultant. Some (minority) people felt let down by his proposal of an alternative approach to AA, for which social justice activists had fought so hard; equally, (white) senior business leaders failed to see how an African-American could offer impartial business advice. In order to navigate these dual demands, studies find that diversity professionals often discursively distance themselves from, whilst simultaneously their actual practices continue to address, equality goals (Kirton and Greene, 2009; Mease, 2015; Prasad et al., 2011). In the Australian university context, Ahmed (2007: 238) discovered that with 'equity' work weighed down by too much baggage, the diversity framework enabled diversity professionals to have a stronger voice in terms of policy action. Therefore, repositioning equality work as a business strategy can be perceived as a positive development.

Existing literature offers limited insights on external D&I consultants as they are usually subsumed within the broader category of diversity professionals. However, working on the outside of organisations has implications for professional practice (Litvin, 2002; Marsh, 2009). We know, for example, from the wider management consulting literature that the maturity of the consulting industry means that client organisations are more conscious of getting value for money (Sturdy et al., 2009). This is problematic for D&I consultants because if proving impact is elusive across the consulting piece, it is especially so in 'people' areas such as organisational learning and culture change (Wright and Kitay, 2002) where we would broadly locate D&I consulting. This leaves D&I consulting vulnerable to undervaluing requiring the development of counter discursive strategies. Management consultancy literature also indicates that if consulting is about effecting change in order to improve client

organisations' performance, the consultant's diagnosis of the problem and proposed solutions must be underpinned by knowledge of the client's industry (Fincham et al., 2008; Sturdy and Wright, 2008). The problem here is that diversity professionals bring diversity expertise, but not necessarily in-depth industry knowledge. Still, studies suggest that in order to maximise authority and credibility D&I professionals now need to possess general business and industry knowledge, rather than merely personal/activist experiences of discrimination and disadvantage, (Greene and Kirton, 2009).

In summary, scholars agree that the discursive turn to the business case for diversity did not solve historic organisational and managerial wariness of equality policies despite the efforts of many diversity professionals to reposition themselves (Ahmed, 2007; Kelly and Dobbin, 1998; Kirton et al., 2007). While the diversity literature suggests that D&I professionals/consultants are change agents, studies identify constraints, tensions and ambiguities inherent or inscribed in their work (Kirton et al., 2007; Swan and Fox, 2010). However, the dearth of research on external D&I consultants specifically, and especially in the UK context where as discussed later, the big consulting firms do not offer a D&I service line, impedes understanding of this sub-group of diversity professionals, their work and its significance for their relationships with client organisations, and ultimately for the prospects for organisational diversity management.

Theoretical framework: D&I consulting as discursive practice

Diversity management is widely regarded as discursive in character, constantly influenced by other social and organizational discourses (Prasad et al., 2010) that diversity professionals interact with and act upon (Tatli and Ozbilgin 2009). Recognition of this guides our analysis. Fairclough's body of work on discourse analysis has been influential on qualitative studies of organisations and work, and provides a framework for theorising organisational actors'

discursive strategies and practices. In summary, Fairclough's (2005: 915-6) approach to discourse states that 'people's concepts of the world they live and act within contribute to its reproduction and transformation; and the social phenomena are socially constructed in discourse.' Thus, discourse is 'a facet of practices and structures as well as of processes/events' (Fairclough, 2005: 918).

Following Fairclough, Marsh (2009: 111) positions management consulting as a discursive practice, a lens which she claims is largely absent from the consulting literature (Clegg et al., 2004 is one exception), but which is insightful, being able to reveal the existence of competing and evolving discourses, and how these form and are formed by consulting processes. It also helps 'locate issues of power and knowledge within situated interaction' within organisations and wider society, thereby uncovering struggles for discursive dominance among different actors (Marsh, 2009: 115). Similarly, Clegg et al. (2004: 36) see management consulting as primarily a linguistic activity, through which consultants have the opportunity to introduce new language that changes organisational thinking. In this sense, discursive practices represent a component of change agency, as argued in the diversity literature (Tatli and Ozbilgin, 2009). As change agents, diversity professionals have the opportunity to marshal discursive practices to encourage critical organisational diversity management rather than slavish adoption of the latest fashion (Prasad et al., 2011; Tatli, 2011).

Moreover, external D&I consultants are able to introduce new language and thinking into the organisational change process because they circulate among multiple organisations providing expertise, working on and learning from different projects, and networking with their professional group (Prasad et al., 2011). Litvin (2002: 161), in the North American context, argues that consultants' agency is constrained because employers already know what they

want to ‘buy’ from them and they select consultants whose services best reflect the ideas they already have. This suggests that D&I consultants’ discursive activity is mediated by the pre-existing discursive context combined with their need to secure contracts and motivate action in organisations. This in turn influences D&I consultants to ‘retell’ the business case and possibly compromise their own personal values. However, this claim arguably simplifies the client-consultant relationship and underestimates D&I consultants’ linguistic creativity in different contexts. For example, Greene and Kirton (2009) found that while UK-based diversity professionals did ‘retell’ the business case in order to gain credibility with senior managers, they did so within a broader business ethics narrative consonant with the fashion for corporate social responsibility, and with the social justice foundations of the equality project in the UK context.

In summary, Fairclough’s (2005) approach to discourse proves useful for studying D&I consultants’ discursive practices as a means of connecting their subjective selves with wider societal and organisational discourses in order to improve understanding of diversity management as it occurs in context. Drawing on our findings, we outline a descriptive classification of consultant discursive strategies (see Figure 1), informing how they seek to work with, and self-position vis-à-vis clients in order to overcome barriers and undertake their work.

INSERT FIGURE 1/TABLE 1 ABOUT HERE

The classification labels four broad, descriptive strategies which consultants may utilise, that are related to the level of conflict/tension between client orientations and consultant values: ‘Survivalist Acceptance’; ‘Principled Resistance’; ‘Pragmatic Adaptation’; and ‘Creative Appropriation’ (Table 1). We argue that these strategies have different implications for self-positioning within the organisation; use of diversity/equality rhetoric; requirements for client

involvement; and types of activities undertaken. We propose that it is useful to classify consultant strategies in this way to illuminate the tensions they face in interaction with their clients and the approaches they utilise in response.

Methods

UK based external D&I consultants are a difficult group to access not least because most operate as time-pressed sole traders. When scoping the project, we found no large UK management consultancy firms UK offering specific D&I consulting. The websites of the ‘Big 4’ⁱ included D&I reports and information about their internal D&I strategy, but D&I was not specifically listed as a consulting service. Preliminary interviews with a couple of longstanding consultants with extensive industry links confirmed that in the UK D&I consulting is most typically offered by solo consultants or small consulting firms.

We recruited participants to the study by a combination of ‘cold calls’ to small D&I consultancies identified in an Internet search, and snowballing from a group of prior contacts interviewed for an earlier study of diversity professionals (Author B and Author A XXXX). Our eventual interview sample of 28 external D&I consultants comprised solo consultants (8); small consultancy owners/directors with external associates (12); small consultancy firm owners/directors with (< 5) employees (6); employees of small consultancy firms (2). The sample consisted of 17 white women; five BME women; four white men; two BME men; six LGBT people (including three of the white men). Our D&I consultants typically had complex job histories and experience across different functions and industries. None came from a management consulting background, rather most recent jobs were D&I role in a large organisation (16); management role (7); other professional role (2); academic (3). Some (4) of those previously holding management/other professional roles had acted as *diversity champions* in their former organisations (i.e. middle managers with an additional role in

promoting diversity ideas and ideals). It is also important to note that our sample mostly worked with clients across the private and public sectors; but some focused on one or the other usually depending on their own work background. All but two worked solely with UK-based clients.

Semi-structured interviews lasting 60-75 minutes included several themes: career background, career strategies, current/recent work profile, views on diversity paradigm, consultant-client relationships, stakeholder involvement. The semi-structured approach facilitated open and expansive responses, which enabled us to understand experiences and perspectives. Most interviews were conducted face-to-face, and a smaller number by telephone or Skype due to logistical and scheduling difficulties. Interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim. Data was analysed using both deductive and inductive approaches. We used NVIVO software, initially utilising broad *a priori* codes derived from the interview guide themes, our earlier research about diversity practitioners and the updated literature review conducted at the outset of this project. These codes were then supplemented with sub-codes after preliminary reading and discussion between the co-authors of individual transcripts and initial thematically coded organised excerpts. 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* understanding. For example, the themes of undervaluing and under-resourcing emerged as prominent sub-themes cutting across the broader codes of current/recent work profile, views on diversity paradigm, consultant-client relationships. In order to enhance the rigour of the data analysis, we also held an end-of-project workshop to which our consultants and selected academics in the field were invited. We presented preliminary findings, which stimulated feedback, questions and debate, enabling us to refine our interpretation within this exploratory study.

Diversity management and the UK context

Although now a global concept, the trajectory of organisational diversity management has varied among countries, necessitating a few words about the specific UK country context. The turn to diversity in the UK occurred within a legislative framework that did not allow for US-style AA. Although the UK's legacy 'equal opportunity' (EO) approach did give rise to some contestation among stakeholders, its liberal orientation and underlying principle of equal treatment meant that it did not attract the same degree of backlash as that witnessed in the USA (Greene and Kirton 2009). By the early 2000s over 80 per cent of UK companies had at least partially switched from EO and were using the term 'diversity' on their websites to describe their policies in this area (Point and Singh 2003); moreover, as per the USA the business case pervades in practitioner and academic discourse (Greene and Kirton, 2009). Nevertheless, underpinning diversity management in the UK is relatively comprehensive anti-discrimination equality legislation in the Equality Act 2010 (with nine 'protected characteristics' and public sector duty to promote equality). Therefore, social justice, legal compliance and business goals are all included in UK organisational diversity work. Further, available evidence indicates that the majority of organisational policies still focus on characteristics protected by the legislation (van Wanrooy et al., 2014) rather than on the broader range of characteristics cited in diversity management theory (Greene and Kirton, 2009). Our starting point for this research was that this external discursive context frames D&I consultants' work within organisations providing both constraints and enablers influencing their discursive strategies and practices.

Research findings

Three sections discuss consultants' discursive strategies for telling and selling the value of D&I work. The first section – *The discursive context: consulting in an undervalued area* –

addresses the research question on organisational barriers encountered by D&I consultants. This question is further addressed in the second section with a more specific focus on the organisational locus of D&I work - *The taint of HR and discursive strategies for overcoming it*. In the third section – *Marshalling evolving discourses of diversity towards values-driven consulting* – the research question on the discursive ideas and strategies that inform consultants’ work with, and self-positioning vis-à-vis, clients is addressed. Where appropriate, we elaborate on how the findings link to our four-fold classification.

The discursive context: consulting in an undervalued area

Consultants believed that negative talk about diversity initiatives circulated inside organisations, particularly among line-managers, and had led to the undervaluing of D&I as an idea and policy area. The premise before even beginning consulting projects was that while most organisations exhibit rhetorical commitment to D&I, undervaluing resulted in under-resourcing, which created a constrained context and elevated the importance of discursive counter-strategies. As one consultant said, “*It’s a very challenging space to operate in*”. One challenge in addition to most organisations’ low overall budget for D&I work was low fees for consultants, which for them symbolised undervaluing of the work as well as of those who undertake it:

“...there’s such an enormous undervaluing and sometimes a complete no valuing financially. They think that they can enlist people for peanuts and that’s offensive ... there are a lot of people out there who have the skills and abilities and who are oftentimes just not given the compensation that they should be given.”

On the one hand, some interviewees were blasé, excusing the under-resourcing of D&I work in the current (post-Global Financial Crisis) era as partly down to economic and business

constraints. On the other hand, many were also aware that organisations made strategic choices about investment of meagre available resources, and few organisations regarded diversity as contributing to core business objectives, despite widespread deployment of business case rhetoric. This left D&I vulnerable to marginalization and the first area for resourcing cuts. Indeed, many consultants observed that large clients had scaled back their in-house diversity resource over the last 10 years. Interestingly, these developments had created an opening for some external consultants to secure retainer contracts with clients, sometimes their former employers, where they filled the senior level D&I expertise gap:

“When the financial crisis hit a few years ago, we had a really good year because a number of clients came back to us and said, ‘we’ve got all sorts of budget constraints. It’s a very tough year so we’ve only got X amount to spend on this issue and we are going to spend it with you because we trust you’.”

Other interviewees experienced this as a tension rather than opportunity, noting that some organisations were now getting ‘*top notch*’ expertise from external consultants ‘*for a fraction of the cost*’ of employing a senior diversity manager on a permanent contract, an additional demonstration of undervaluing D&I. This was seen as allowing organisations to promulgate a rhetoric of sustained commitment to D&I during challenging times while cutting costs. Most consultants were cynical about what outsourcing D&I work really said about organisational commitment:

“... 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 ... but, if you look at for example pre-2008 crisis, lots and lots of money was spent on D&I, post then, it’s been reined back. That perhaps tells you about the real level of commitment to this from organisations.”

Fundamentally, consultants observed that clients were sceptical and nervous about the ‘truth’ of the business case and faced the dilemma of whether there would/could be return on investment from diversity initiatives:

“[Some organisations] do it because they think it will have an impact on the bottom line and it will make them more profitable, but they all want to be able to show that whatever they invest is actually making a difference.”

In light of this, consultants reported that rather than the much promulgated strategic business case for diversity, client motivations that they had to work with and act on discursively, were pared down to run-of-the-mill HR issues such as the state of the external labour market and the need to proactively position as an ‘employer of choice’. Other HR motivations included deflecting discrimination claims or requiring assistance for D&I-related award applications. Such narrow organisational motivations had implications for the consulting services to which they were able to persuade organisations to commit. Such clients were termed ‘box-tickers’. A principled stance and unwillingness to compromise by offering box-ticking solutions had driven one interviewee to arrive at the personally difficult decision to give up D&I consulting altogether:

“I mean they didn’t really want to engage with philosophy. You know, most of the demand is about box ticking. So, in a way the depth that I brought to the conversation and the kind of sustainable ideas and solutions that I offered didn’t really have a demand.”

The dilemma consultants confronted repeatedly was that clients were often attracted by the latest fashion (Prasad et al. 2011). Many interviewees spoke somewhat cynically about diversity fads that have come and gone over the years, the latest of which was the much-

hyped unconscious bias (UB) training, for which there was great demand from clients but little enthusiasm from consultants:

“I would hate to imagine what the UK PLC spend on UB training has been over the past six years and what the return on investment for that training is. There has been very little follow-through after it ... like it’s a panacea for everything.”

Consultants did not regard their professional group as responsible for the spread of this particular fad, but they necessarily developed discursive counter-strategies that hinged on the assertion that such training interventions only worked as part of a holistic D&I programme. Thus, most consultants rejected ‘feasting on the low-hanging fruit’ as one interviewee put it; rather they sought to counter negative discourses surrounding D&I by providing consulting services possessing a high degree of integrity and attachment to meaningful cultural change. Indeed, many interviewees talked about actively avoiding working with organisations that merely wanted to be ‘seen to be doing something’, but with little investment, which they saw as indicative of lack of real commitment to D&I. Nevertheless, external D&I consultants entered the field in full awareness of the potential negativity surrounding their work and the struggle it created for the telling and selling of the kind of holistic D&I programmesⁱⁱ they deemed necessary.

The taint of HR and discursive strategies for overcoming it

Previous studies have noted that one significant impediment to embedding diversity in core business functions and thereby winning managerial support is that responsibility for diversity management typically lies with HR, which is tainted by a discourse of cynicism and irrelevance in the wider organisation (Greene and Kirton 2009; Shapiro and Allison 2007). Moreover, for many consultants, location in HR necessarily meant that projects started from a

limited understanding of the strategic impact of diversity work. Thus, the HR location did not sit well with the business case discourse that they invariably invoked to tell and sell the value of diversity work. While HR professionals rarely understood the business challenges that the organisation faced, consultants often faced trying to sell the business value of holistic D&I programmes to them, rather than those at the core of the business.

In order to mitigate the taint of HR ownership and put D&I on the business agenda, consultants' discursive strategy was to insist on access to the board. They argued that this was necessary for the purposes of defining business goals and reporting on impact and outcomes of their work across the business. Insistence on access and involvement of client stakeholders can be identified in three of the four approaches in our classification (Figure 1, Table 1) with the level of this insistence increasing from 'pragmatic adaptation' to 'creative appropriation' to 'principled resistance'. The fact that consultants frequently used the word 'insist' is indicative of discursive struggle. Practically, they needed to navigate organisational power structures (Mease 2015) in order to 'sell' their services on terms that they defined within the wider discursive context of undervaluing. Some were prepared to sever relations with organisations where mainstream senior involvement was minimal or entirely absent:

“A lot of them will offload it onto HR and they'll have maybe one or two people at the top who are positive and sign everything off. Say for a [staff] survey or something, I would write a letter for the chief executive to send out ... if it just comes from HR, I wouldn't do it. Unless I know that there is buy-in from the top ... it's a waste of time.”

Discursively repackaging D&I services by injecting a strong D&I dimension into other consulting services, using nomenclature such as 'inclusive leadership' was another strategy employed to gain the involvement of senior leaders beyond HR (placed in the 'creative

appropriation' strategy approach in our classification). Moreover, several interviewees explained how they had also realised that speaking leadership language was a way to attract greater monetary value to D&I:

“For D&I you have to charge less ... I wanted to get paid at a level at which I would be paid if I was doing leadership work. ...in the early days, I took a certain day rate and at some point, I said that's my minimum ... I wouldn't go below and I turned work away. I would say, “how much do you pay your leadership development consultants?” I'm not going to be paid less than that.”

An additional dimension of the positioning of D&I within HR that female consultants were acutely aware of, was the gender dynamic given the fact that HR is a feminised field of practice whereas senior management is masculinised. As one consultant explained:

“Most HR people are women, so you're asking women to advocate on behalf of other under-represented groups mostly to men. That dynamic is not a healthy one ... [diversity] is not thought important enough [for men's involvement] ...”

It was then necessary to counteract discursively the double taint (HR and feminisation) in order to execute their work in the way they deemed important for its success. Two female consultants spoke of the internal struggle they experienced communicating their worth and value to clients, particularly senior management. One of these women, who paradoxically had considerable mainstream business and management experience, sought help from a business coach in order to enhance the impression management strategies as part of their repertoire of persuasion (Wright and Kitay 2002):

“I’m sure that I undersell myself ... negotiating about money has been something that’s been a real challenge and it’s been really good having a business adviser who calls me to task.”

One BME male consultant saw his ethnic identity as relevant to the difficulties he had experienced securing contracts. In a field dominated by white women, he felt that clients were less receptive to him (similar to Thomas, 2008). The self-doubt that a minority of female and BME D&I consultants expressed, underlines parallels with the position of women and BME people in workplaces more generally. It is of course ironic that this occurs in the D&I space too.

Marshalling evolving discourses of diversity towards values-driven consulting

Creating a discourse and narrative about the importance of diversity that aligns with organisational concerns and management fashions could potentially be a way of telling and selling the case for D&I interventions (see Litvin, 2002). However, it is a strategy fraught with dilemmas because of the potential for the consultant’s own objectives and values to end up being sacrificed (Kirton et al., 2007; Mease, 2015). Still, most interviewees did not lament movement from the discourse of EO associated with employee rights, legal compliance and developing formal policies. All felt that the relatively tough laws and regulations in the UK underpinning policies had not helped organisations achieve the genuine and deep cultural change needed to create a climate of inclusion. In addition, there was agreement with Ahmed’s (2007) claim that switching terms regularly can be useful to stop people blocking the message about the necessity for action. Most saw the relatively recent deployment of ‘diversity and inclusion’ as a creative discursive strategy to steer the content of their consulting work towards a progressive change agenda rather than merely helping organisations to write policies or to manage problems associated with having a diverse

workforce. The discursive strategies outlined above would therefore fall into the ‘pragmatic adaptation’ approach within our classification:

“... how you frame an issue does matter because it will determine what you think the solution is. If you frame an issue as a problem and you call it equal opportunities, then you’re going to think the solution is policies and getting those right. Whereas if you frame this more as a cultural change project then you are going to start to wake up to where are the real responsibilities, what needs to happen and the primary goal is no longer writing good stuff in policies, it’s actually in terms of how you shift the culture.”

Furthermore, many consultants also genuinely felt the discourse of inclusion had the potential to overcome some of the criticisms of the business case for diversity centring on the potential exploitation of difference or disregard for the moral case for equality (Kirton and Greene, 2009; Mease, 2015). Hence, most had reframed their services as delivering on the business case for *inclusion* rather than merely diversity. Thus, moving more towards the ‘creative appropriation’ approach within our classification, inclusion was a discursive turn deployed by consultants as an opportunity to reinsert their personal commitment to equality and social justice after a long period of having to downplay this when the business case was the most prominent discourse:

“I think that I have learned over time how to manage my own beliefs about what needs to change and to present that in a way that is acceptable to organisations. I have had to change my language; I have had to change how I position myself over the years ... in order to get into organisations.”

However, a major practical challenge remained to persuade clients to move towards developing cultural change initiatives that would ensure the translation of policies into lived employee experiences. There was a sense of frustration that many organisations still saw policies as the beginning and the end of diversity management, which the inclusion discourse had not overcome entirely. Nevertheless, some interviewees felt that adding inclusion had facilitated an important personal goal of broadening the agenda beyond numerical targets for under-represented groups and a stereotyped understanding of ‘protected characteristics’. Here this fits more with a ‘creative appropriation’ strategy.

However, this project was not without its tensions either, as some consultants claimed that organisations attach differential value to different types of workforce diversity hence violating the rhetoric of all differences being equally valued (Lorbiecki and Jack 2000; Noon 2007). Some consultants talked about a hierarchy of equality ‘strands’ still existing under cover of the inclusion discourse, which they tried but struggled to interrupt in their discursive interactions with clients:

“I feel like we’ve gone backwards ... gender is absolutely there on the agenda, LGBT probably is, and increasingly so, but very few organisations want to have a serious conversation or even have the data to be able to see what’s going on when it comes to ethnicity. When it comes to disability, religion, forget about it.”

While the discursive strategies they employed attempted to overcome a narrow framing, interviewees acknowledged that organisations had a greater business incentive to tackle gender because of the need to attract and retain women in feminised areas. Clients were also sensitive to current public/media debate on issues such as the gender pay gap and the under-representation of women on corporate boards, which could have reputational consequences for ‘named and shamed’ organisations. While consultants carefully employed discursive

strategies that had some power to influence the organisational agenda, they were fully aware of the challenges when organisations are located in external contingencies and they themselves must continuously sell their services. Thus, there was a permanency to the discursive struggle to expand the agenda.

Despite the practical and discursive strategies D&I consultants' employ to steer the content of their work and to increase its value, consulting literature informs us that 'soft consulting', for example, organisational learning and culture change, is inherently a 'hard sell' because of the difficulties of proving impact and value (Wright and Kitay 2002). We would add that nowhere is this likely to be truer than in D&I consulting. Further, as either solo practitioners or owners/employees of small consultancies, D&I consultants do not have the cachet of working for large consultancies and the onus is very much upon them to talk up their individual pedigree in order to convince clients to buy their services. This rested on possessing and projecting high human and social capital evidenced by talking up their record of business/management experience including previous senior corporate positions, a history of managing change, all combined with sound knowledge of diversity issues. Their personal discursive skills such as negotiation and persuasion therefore became particularly important (Tatli and Ozbilgin 2009) as did their capacity to produce themselves as credible and serious in the terms defined by businesses (see Ahmed 2007):

“... we [she and her associates] have all worked inside these large organisations who are our clients ... we know how to make change happen inside complex organisations. We come at it from a holistic approach to managing change inside a multinational company. So because we use their language, their models, we talk about change in the same way ...”

Thus, these consultants recognised that their agentic power to demand access to senior managers, to control the content of their work and to earn well from it, rested upon the interplay of situatedness, relationality and praxis (Tatli and Ozbilgin 2009). It also helped if consultants had ‘other strings to their bow’ derived from their human capital in the form of broad business experience. This gave them additional consulting specialisms beyond D&I and put them in a stronger position to be bolder in their demands or to turn down D&I work if the clients’ wishes (and budget) did not suit their own visions for the work.

All consultants in our sample drew upon deeply held personal motivations for doing diversity work beyond helping businesses and making money. Such self-narratives reflect a prominent theme in existing studies of diversity professionals of wanting to make a difference to the working lives of marginalised groups and do something they were passionate about (Kirton and Greene 2009; Litvin 2002; Tatli 2011):

“I don’t know anybody who has made a substantial amount of money out of it. That’s not what motivates, certainly not what motivates me. If I can keep the roof over my head that will be good enough.”

We did not find any consultant who completely embraced the ‘survivalist acceptance’ strategy. Most could find work within contexts that facilitated more alignment of own values with client orientations. For example, some consultants preferred to work with non-profit or public sector organisations where they could more openly work within their own values framing and where the discursive selling of D&I services as offering tangible business benefits was less of an issue. Some worked across sectors but selectively charged certain kinds of clients, relatively low rates:

“I can say that some of the charities that I work for on diversity, I might be charging down to half my [usual] rate but that’s because I would choose to do that if I think the project is something which fits with my own values.”

In this way, elements of the ‘principled resistance’ strategy were clearly apparent. Space constraints do not allow us to discuss motivations in detail, but values and commitment certainly featured in many D&I consultants’ weighing up of types of clients, rates of pay and personal satisfaction from doing meaningful work that they believed makes a difference:

“... what you tend to find is as you do more and more projects, the more of your personality, the more of who you are, your values and everything else starts to shine out more and then you start to realise that this isn’t a career. It’s not a career at all, it’s more of a ... I don’t know, a destination, something that you want to do, something that you really want to achieve.”

Holding on to the values-driven nature of diversity work and inserting this into their discursive strategies seemed to help many consultants reconcile the inherent drawbacks of managing the commercial venture of D&I consulting with their personal aspirations for the work.

Conclusions

While there are existing studies of diversity professionals, D&I consultants specifically are under-researched even though external D&I consulting is growing and therefore likely having considerable influence on organisational diversity management (Prasad et al., 2011).

Diversity professionals’ change strategies are inevitably influenced by the fact that they are inside of organisational politics and power structures (Kirton et al., 2007). In contrast, our contribution is to focus on D&I consultants who are on the outside, where career progression

does not depend on doing and saying the right things around the right people (Greene and Kirton, 2009). Instead, they face the imperative to continuously make the case for D&I to multiple organisations, an imperative which brings their discursive strategies into sharp relief.

This article aimed to explore how external D&I consultants ‘tell and sell’ the value of their work to clients. Two research questions were addressed: (i) what organisational barriers do D&I consultants perceive as impacting upon their work, and (ii) what discursive ideas and strategies inform how they seek to work with, and self-position vis-à-vis clients in order to overcome such barriers and undertake their work? Rather than exploring D&I consultants’ role in developing and implementing diversity management policies, our contribution is to take a step back and foreground the reflection that precedes D&I consultants’ action vis-à-vis clients, thus positioning D&I consulting as a discursive activity (Marsh, 2009; Prasad et al., 2011). A way of making sense of this is proposed in our descriptive classification, which illuminates *the discursive strategies* utilised by consultants in interaction with their clients. The alignment with any one classification differs depending on the specific consultant/client relationship and there can be examples of mixed approaches across classifications. The most common strategies were ‘pragmatic adaptation’ and ‘creative appropriation’, with a small number utilising ‘principled resistance’ in conjunction with ‘creative appropriation’. While a small number indicated they were struggling financially, this did not lead to ‘survivalist acceptance’ in any all-encompassing way for any of the consultants in our sample.

It is important to acknowledge that organisational diversity management occurs within broader historical, economic and societal contexts (Greene and Kirton, 2009; Tatli and Ozbilgin, 2009). We argue that in the UK, this means a relatively strong legal framework for equalities acting as a foundation for a potentially facilitative discursive context for D&I work, alongside the constraint of economic conditions impacting organisations’ D&I resourcing.

The turbulence of the last decade had pushed many organisations into scaling back their internal diversity function, which consultants posited indicated its low priority. This imposed limitations on consultants' capacity to influence let alone control the terms of engagement with clients with regard to services sold and their monetary and symbolic value. Hence, the footprint of clients in producing consultants' self-positioning as experts and in turn their discursive practices must be recognised. Moreover, some consultants observed how paradoxically the softer, longer-term aims of inclusion that some clients had adopted rendered investment in D&I even more fragile and vulnerable to cutbacks in periods of crisis/austerity. Thus, while consultants may introduce language to change organisational thinking as per Clegg et al. (2004), we question whether the addition of 'inclusion' to the discursive repertoire of diversity professionals will actually make any positive difference in the longer term to the value that organisations attach to diversity work, especially if it is through 'pragmatic adaptation' rather than 'creative appropriation'.

The taint of HR and low engagement of senior management emerged as major constraints for materialising D&I consultants' agentic power (Tatli and Ozbilgin, 2009) as exercised via discursive strategies. We saw how organisational power structures influenced consultants' struggle for control over the content and direction of their work. Ownership lying with the relatively low power, lower status field of HR emerges in the literature as a structural barrier for diversity professionals (Greene and Kirton, 2009; Shapiro and Allison, 2007).

Accordingly, the majority of consultants tactically rejected a professional HR identity; being all too aware of the credibility and (gendered) undervaluation problems surrounding HR practitioners, having worked in or around HR. Therefore, most interviewees talked up their own human and social capital in the form of wider management, business, organisational or academic expertise, sometimes a combination of all, as relevant to their D&I work. The fact that this was a necessary part of D&I consultants' strategies suggests a permanent discursive

struggle marks their practice. As suggested by consulting literature, this self-narrative of rounded expertise also seemed to instil a high level of confidence in their own value (Fincham et al., 2008). This dimension of their self-narratives seemed more important, or at least more prominent, than their demographic characteristics which scholars argue frame diversity professionals' change agency (Tatli and Ozbilgin, 2009). While some interviewees did acknowledge their personal identities as having influenced their choice of D&I consulting, they typically saw this as contextual rather than directly impacting their praxis.

Because external D&I consultants work with multiple organisations, the undervaluing of diversity work (Kirton et al., 2007; Tatli, 2011) became a major situated constraint surrounding their discursive strategies for continuously telling and selling the value of D&I. The marginalisation and undervaluing of organisational equality and diversity work is not new. The point is that the discursive turn to the business case for diversity did not solve the problem of undervaluing the field (Greene and Kirton, 2009; Noon, 2007; Tatli, 2011).

Cognisant of this, some D&I consultants exercised their linguistic creativity by adopting the new term of 'inclusion', which foregrounds (softer) business goals around corporate social responsibility while to some degree reattaching diversity to its historical roots and social justice goals (Bendick and Egan, 2010). Hence, the consultants' use of *inclusion* was a creative discursive strategy ('creative appropriation') that they invoked to gain allies and to enhance organisational commitment to D&I work in the absence of measurable business benefits. It also served the objective of selling their consulting services in order to survive professionally. Thus, consultants did not simply retell clients the business case for diversity in order to gain consulting contracts as suggested somewhat cynically by Litvin (2002); rather many of our interviewees genuinely believed that the discourse of inclusion promised both business benefits *and* progressive cultural change ('pragmatic adaptation' strategy).

With regard to practical implications of the study, our classification is useful in illuminating the tensions faced by consultants in interaction with their clients and the discursive strategies they utilise in response. It outlines key areas that can cause conflict for consultants and which guide their responses (e.g. self-positioning, rhetoric, client involvement and activities undertaken). In order to ensure the most productive working relationships, attraction of the widest range of potential consultants, and most useful set of activities, our findings could assist HR professionals in highlighting the importance of the positioning of diversity work within their organisations. In particular, this involves ensuring senior involvement beyond HR prior to embarking on diversity work and engaging D&I consultants. The findings also suggest that HR professionals responsible for diversity work need to think more carefully about how to articulate the value of diversity work, perhaps advocating for 'soft' measures of success and value related to organisational culture (e.g. indicators of employee engagement and satisfaction). This would help shift the organisational diversity agenda away from a bottom-line business case that only seems doomed to perpetuate the undervaluing and under-resourcing of diversity work identified here and elsewhere (Lorbiecki and Jack, 2000; Tatli, 2011). Cheapening diversity work not only ill serves D&I consultants, it also undermines a progressive organisational diversity and inclusion agenda.

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Table 1: Descriptive classification of D&I consultants' discursive strategies

Survivalist Acceptance	<p><i>Self-positioning:</i> Needs the client contract in order to survive.</p> <p><i>Rhetoric:</i> Accepts and utilises client rhetoric and hopes for progressive outcomes.</p> <p><i>Client involvement:</i> Will accept limited access to leaders and stakeholders as determined by the client.</p> <p><i>Activities undertaken:</i> As determined by the client.</p>
Principled Resistance	<p><i>Self-positioning:</i> Will only accept the client contract if criteria are met that fit with own values. Will turn down work.</p> <p><i>Rhetoric:</i> Will only use language that meets own ethical principles around equality, diversity and inclusion.</p> <p><i>Client involvement:</i> Demands deep inclusive involvement and commitment to equality outcomes from the client.</p> <p><i>Activities undertaken:</i> Only those that fit with own values.</p>
Creative Appropriation	<p><i>Self-positioning:</i> Will bend and reshape rhetoric to align with own values.</p> <p><i>Rhetoric:</i> Repackages new rhetoric to ensure that equality values are met, sometimes concealing values-driven practice within newer business rhetoric and practices.</p> <p><i>Client involvement:</i> Makes demands of the client for stakeholder access and involvement in process.</p> <p><i>Activities undertaken:</i> Range of possible activities negotiated for each client situation but focused on potential for equality progress.</p>
Pragmatic Adaptation	<p><i>Self-positioning:</i> Critical but pragmatic about what is possible.</p> <p><i>Rhetoric:</i> Will marshal new discourses to fit own values but also sees them as useful and beneficial.</p> <p><i>Client involvement:</i> Makes demands of the client for access and process where necessary.</p> <p><i>Activities undertaken:</i> Range of possible activities that are negotiated for each client situation.</p>

Figure 1. Classification of consultant discursive strategies

ⁱ Deloitte; Price Waterhouse Cooper; KPMG; Ernst & Young.

ⁱⁱ The majority of consultants offered a wide range of different services, wherever possible building several interventions into a ‘holistic’ D&I cultural change programme: bespoke and ‘off-the-shelf’ training courses; strategy writing; workforce audits; diagnostic surveys; leadership coaching; employee/stakeholder engagement exercises; diversity-proofing HR procedures; advice on employee cases/claims; advice and support for diversity award applications; design/delivery of culture change initiatives.