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Embracing Discursive Paradox: Consultants Navigating the Constitutive Tensions of Diversity Work

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Abstract

This article addresses how diversity consultants manage the dual demands of social justice and organizational goals or priorities. I suggest that navigating this "discursive paradox" is one of—if not *the*—defining feature of diversity work. To investigate this discursive paradox, I analyze diversity work as a process (rather than a collection of products) as evidenced in interviews with 19 diversity consultants. The results offer two derivative discursive paradoxes that emerged in consultants' talk about diversity work: the tension between broad and narrow constructions of human differences and the tension between emphasizing change at the organizational and individual levels. Rather than framing these tensions as inherently problematic, I examine how consultants use them to create possibilities for change. Consequently, this work offers a promising approach for understanding and facilitating other forms of socially motivated organizational change, such as organizational sustainability or health and well-being campaigns.

Keywords: diversity, consulting, CCO, organizational change

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Over the past few decades, organizational scholars have become increasingly interested in issues of diversity. On one hand, they have addressed the relationship between human differences and organizations by examining how identities affect experiences of work, how group demographics influence organizational outcomes, and how differences are built into and produced by organizational structures themselves. On the other hand, diversity scholarship addresses diversity work, which includes the initiatives and efforts that occur among organizations to change practices related to human differences. However, the voices, skills, and sensemaking practices of diversity professionals— the people who actively engage organizations through organized initiatives that address problems and practices associated with diversity in organizations—remain under-examined in this literature. This relative oversight is particularly troublesome given recent moves in organizational scholarship toward the Communicative Constitution of Organization (CCO), a body of scholarship that describes how organizations are accomplished through communication texts and practices. CCO scholarship has challenged the notion that organizations are stable coherent structures that people move in and out of. CCO theories describe organizations as contingent, collaborative accomplishments constituted by people's interactions, and consequently in constant states of becoming (Putnam & Nicotera, 2010; Tsoukas & Chia, 2002). Accordingly, diversity professionals' communication and sensemaking structures are a site where social, organizational, and personal forces come together and are negotiated. These negotiations manifest as material organizational practices that affect individual lives, organizational structures and meanings, and ultimately social configurations of human difference.

This study expands on scholarship that critiques the effects of diversity work to develop more nuanced understandings of what *doing* that work entails. Perhaps most importantly, it suggests that navigating "discursive paradox" is one of—if not *the*—defining feature of diversity work. It defines discursive paradoxes as dominant discourses that appear contradictory, but are productive in pursuing the goals of organizational change. This argument draws on two recent trends in organizational scholarship: a focus on tensions (Trethewey & Ashcraft, 2004) and the four flows theory of CCO (McPhee & Zaug, 2009/2000). The resulting analysis and conclusions offer insights into the ways

diversity consultants manage the dual demands of social justice imperatives and organizational goals and priorities. Consequently, this work points toward a promising theoretical direction for understanding other forms of socially motivated organizational change such as organizational sustainability initiatives or health and well-being campaigns. More specifically, this study focuses on the role of two discursive paradoxes that emerged in consultants' talk about diversity work: the tension between broad and narrow constructions of human differences and the tension between emphasizing change at the organizational and individual levels. Rather than framing these paradoxes as inherently problematic, I examine how consultants use them to open possibilities for change.

Although this study addresses skills and strategies that consultants used to create organizational change, it does so by building on work that demonstrates how organizational constructions of human differences contribute to social bias in terms of gender (Acker, 1990; Ashcraft, 2005; Ashcraft & Mumby, 2004; Mumby, 1998; Trethewey, 1999), race (Ashcraft & Allen, 2003; Mirchandani, 2003; Nkomo, 1992; Parker, 2005) and sexuality (Burrell & Hearn, 1989; D'Emilio, 1993; Spradlin, 1998; Woog, 2001). It assumes difference is problematically embedded in organizational structures, but it does not focus on critiquing specific and problematic processes by which human differences are built into organizational structures. Instead, this analysis focuses on diversity work: the organized efforts of diversity professionals to create change among those problematic practices of human difference. By addressing diversity *work*, this analysis brings scholarly critiques that identify problematic practices of human difference into the contexts of diversity professionals' efforts to change those practices.

This article begins with a historical overview of the emergence of diversity work in the United States and addresses both its social justice and organizational legacies. It then engages the voices of scholars who have contributed to the construction and critique of diversity work. It pays particular attention to the balance of social justice and organizational imperatives, as well as the voices of diversity professionals in this literature. The Method section draws on what I call a "tensional approach" that focuses on various forms of tension for analysis. The analysis section illustrates how each discursive paradox

surfaced in consultants' talk about their work and examines the *doing* of diversity work by identifying the strategies consultants' described using to navigate those tensions.

The Workers in Diversity Work

Given that diversity work is not just executed but actively constituted by diversity professionals, the historical context from which diversity work emerged lends insight into the discourses that dominate diversity work today. Diversity work in the United States emerged as a response to the Civil Rights Movement and landmark political policies such as the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and Executive Order 11246 of 1965 (the executive order on affirmative action) that mandated equal treatment regardless of human differences. Although weakly enforced in the 60s, Nixon's instillation of legal power into the Equal Opportunity Employment Council and Committee on Affirmative Action in the 70s (Cokorinos, 2003) forced organizations to comply with legally sanctioned non-discrimination policies. Consequently, a field of consultants and professionals emerged to assist with compliance efforts. As Kelly and Dobbin (1998) have explained, when the Reagan administration significantly limited the reach of non-discrimination policies in the 80s, the field of professionals was forced to rearticulate their practices according to a different set of organizational exigencies.

During the late 80s and early 90s, the term "diversity" emerged in organizational contexts that linked human difference to improved organizational performance, a claim now commonly known as the "business case" for diversity. Organizational discourses during this time were well-suited for the emergence of the business case due to the concurrent emergence of discourses promoting "moral" organizational practices as financially lucrative (Paine, 2003), as well as the "human potential movement" (Lasch-Quinn, 2003) that focused on the psychological health of employees for purposes of maximum productivity. These other "discursive mergers" (Mease, 2012) of the time mirrored the merging of social motivations of the Civil Rights Movement and organizational financial imperatives into discourses of the business case. Still, Lynch (2002) described The First Annual National Diversity Conference, held in 1991, as rife with controversy over the increased

importance placed on financial rather than moral motives for diversity work. Thus, the organizational concept of diversity emerged as, and remains, a contested term and practice born out of a particular historical moment marked by shifting government regulations, diversity professionals justifying their work, and organizational discourses merging moral, psychological, and financial interests.

Tension regarding the motives for diversity work continue to surface. As Tatli (2011) explained, "Mainstream scholars conceptualized the so-called shift as a positive development while the critical scholars were alarmed by its potentially regressive implications for fairness at work" (p. 239). These critiques suggested that diversity initiatives risk reinforcing systems of inequality as they move away from an explicit focus on fostering systemic equality. For example, in her analysis of diversity management literature, Grimes (2002) argued that many diversity initiatives privileged Whiteness and the perspectives of White people, thus reinforcing the notion that a "normal" employee is White. Others have suggested that working *with* organizational structures rather than *against* them compromises possibilities for change. For example, Oseen (1997) claimed that as long as hierarchical organizational structures are primary, power imbalances based on difference would remain integrated in those hierarchies. Similarly, Jonsen, Tatli, Özbilgin, and Bell (2013) described how voluntary and financially motivated diversity initiatives ultimately serve the organization rather than the good of society; they concluded that government regulations should be reintroduced if any real social change is to be achieved.

Diversity professionals are occasionally at the center of this debate. Lasch-Quinn (2003) made this the crux of her argument by positioning diversity professionals as "racial etiquette" trainers who hush the controversial conversations that need to occur in workplaces. Cavanaugh's (1997) claim that "*workplace diversity* is far too important a political project to leave to the unreflective ministrations of diversity consultants and mainstream theorists" (pp. 31-32) implicitly dismissed the notion that diversity consultants are intelligent and informed actors. And, in the most extensive account of diversity practitioners to date, Lynch (2002) casts diversity consultants as mostly problematic, paradoxically for their inability to address existing issues, and their failure to "worry less about categorizing and managing diversity, and simply let it happen" (p. xxxix). Among these critiques, little to no

attention is paid to the lived experience of tensions inherent to working with organizations to foster equality.

Still, the historical emergence of diversity at the intersection of social justice and organizational imperatives highlights the contested and contingent nature of diversity work. Among other things, consultants must navigate organizational power structures (including financial imperatives) as they strive to create ideal practices and meanings associated with human difference. As Janssens and Zanoni (2005) discovered in their analysis of four diversity initiatives in four types of service organizations, "organizations produce their own understandings of diversity and manage diversity in ways that are in line with those understandings" (p. 327). Ahmed (2007b) described a specific example in her own work with a university diversity committee that sought to critically analyze the practices of their university; once the committee released their conclusions to the university, the critical nature was lost as the university used the report to position itself as accomplished in diversity work compared with competing institutions.

Perhaps the challenge of navigating competing discourses leads much of the mainstream literature to focus on "best practices." In her own review of diversity literature, Martin (2000) proposed seven criteria that help create a successful diversity initiative: a focus on actual behavior rather than attitude, the articulation of clear goals and rationale for re-socialization, supportive management, redundancy of change messages, direct employee involvement, allowance of an appropriate time frame, and periodic evaluation of the resocialization process. Other approaches include "integration and learning," in which difference is openly addressed, questioned, and incorporated into everyday decisions of organizational life (Thomas & Ely, 2001). Best practices, however, do not escape the tension between social and organizational imperatives. For example, when considering the articulation of clear goals and rationales, using the business case as a rationale for diversity initiatives has been found to increase participant buy-in (Kidder, Lankau, Chrobot-Mason, Mollica, & Friedman, 2004; Lynch, 2001), but it has also been critiqued for dehumanizing diversity (Kirby & Harter, 2003; Litvin, 2006). Fortunately, there are a few but growing number of studies that analyze how diversity practitioners navigate the tension between social and organizational imperatives. These studies are unique in two important ways.

First, these studies take the perspective of the practitioner (as opposed to texts or initiative designs) as their primary point of analysis. For example, Ahmed's (2007b) analysis, mentioned earlier, explores how government demands for documentation of diversity initiatives have influenced diversity work. Yet her analysis has less to do with the content of the documents than with how those documents are created and used by various practitioners. She makes a similar argument in her discussion regarding the term "diversity" and how practitioners deploy it to help them meet their objectives (Ahmed, 2007a). In her own review of diversity work literature, Hafen (2005) suggested that practitioners should take an "ironic stance" toward diversity—one that embraces the discursive tensions and inconsistencies of diversity work.

Second, these studies treat tensions between organizational and social justice motivations as a constitutive feature of diversity work rather than a problematic rupture in diversity work. This makes sense, given the historical emergence of diversity work. The language of diversity emerged coincidentally with a professional field that (on losing the support of government policies) used organizational imperatives as a way to justify their work (Kelly & Dobbin, 1998). Rejecting either social or organizational imperatives would deny the nature of diversity work: If one gives up attention to social inequality, one is a management consultant; without attention to organizational imperatives, one is an activist. Although critical scholars might describe this integration as capitalist appropriation of civil rights, Tatli's (2011) analysis based on interviews with diversity professionals suggested the opposite. She found that even when *discourses* of diversity are distanced from historical pursuits for equality, *practices* of diversity remain largely focused on addressing institutional inequality. Thus, one could argue that diversity professionals have appropriated financial discourses to serve social justice ends. Similarly, in her analysis of interviews with diversity consultants, Mease (2012) demonstrated how diversity consultants leveraged the business case to meet "occupational demands" of access, motivation, and emotional work as they worked to create institutional change. In short, these studies demonstrate that tensions are historically and practically a central and constitutive feature of diversity work.

Diversity Work as a Negotiated Encounter

I analyze this constitutive tension of diversity work and diversity professionals' strategic negotiation of that tension using a CCO perspective that emphasizes a "grounded in action approach" assuming "organization is grounded in action and discursive forms" (Fairhurst & Putnam, 2004, p. 10). This means that diversity initiatives and their organizational impact are not merely executed, they are made real through communication, albeit communication limited by historical and organizational circumstance. Consequently, understanding how diversity professionals draw on dominant and contested discourses to navigate the tensions of their work is paramount to understanding how organizations—and diversity initiatives executed in organizational contexts—are created, maintained, and changed. More specifically, McPhee and Zaug's (2009/2000) theory of the four flows of communication that constitute an organization guides this analysis. McPhee and Zaug claim that four types of message flows must occur and interact for an organization to exist: 1) member negotiation (focused on who is part of the organization), 2) self-structuring (focused on establishing "internal relations, norms, and social entities" [p. 36] that create long-term's guides for action), 3) activity coordination (focused on work process and solving immediate problems), and 4) institutional positioning (focused on creating an image to outsiders). In other words, communication behaviors of diversity professionals do more than spread ideas about diversity; they actively constitute organizational meanings and practices of diversity by determining who is a part of diversity initiatives, how they should be structured, what they should do, and how they will be portrayed to others. In addition, in the context of diversity initiatives the four flows are operating with two objects of constitution: the diversity initiative itself and the organization it seeks to change.

Given the tension inherent to diversity work and the change that is the objective of diversity work, this analysis focuses on discursive tensions that occur among these four flows and how diversity consultants navigate those tensions. Rather than treating contested and competing discourses as problematic, this study takes a tensional approach that shifts attention away from "resolution (of tensions) and toward an emphasis on ways of dealing" (Trethewey & Ashcraft, 2004,

p. 172). In her analysis of prison guards, Tracy (2004) indicated that such deferral of resolution is beneficial as she concluded that the ability to frame tensions as complementary dialectics, rather than contradictions or double-binds, was healthier and enhanced the guards' ability to survive in the prison environment.

I use the term *discursive tension* to describe one specific form of tension among the many that have gained increased attention in organizational research over the past decade, including a focus on dialectics (Mumby, 2005; Tracy, 2004), paradoxes (Stohl & Cheney, 2001), resistance (Dempsey, Parker, & Krone, 2011; Fleming, 2005; Mumby, 2005), and instability (Collinson, 2003; Meisenbach, 2008) among others. Each of these brings a unique focus to the analysis of some form of inconsistency among existing organizational discourse or practice. I use *discursive tension* to describe a tension that is not explicitly acknowledged or described as difficult by individuals, but surfaces as inconsistent within a discourse (such as diversity) on closer inspection. I use the term *discursive paradox* to describe a discursive tension that, although seemingly contradictory, serves a necessary function.

Trethewey and Ashcraft (2004) point out that "paradox and contradiction necessarily accompany efforts to do things differently amid entrenched systems and habits" (p. 171), indicating that attention to tensions is significant to organizational change, especially when that change challenges entrenched systems of identity politics. When considering the tensions of diversity work in light of CCO, the persistence of tension among discourses that influence the four flows is particularly important because deferred resolution creates a consistent possibility for change in the constitution of the organization. Ultimately, this suggests that analyzing how diversity professionals do the work of "dealing" with discursive tension (and what I argue is a discursive paradox), offers an understanding of *how* diversity professionals constitute "diversity" and (attempt to) create change by shifting the four constitutive flows of the organizations itself. To address this tension, I follow Trethewey and Ashcraft's suggestion that tensional methods should simultaneously use a historical lens, a micro lens (specific practice) and a macro lens (systems that demarcate options for response to tensions) to analyze how practitioners face tensions in their work life.

Method and Questions

Nineteen consultants were interviewed for this study, including men, and women, of White, Black, and Hispanic identities and diverse sexual orientations. The selection criteria required that the interviewees self-identify as diversity consultants, either internal or external to an organization, meaning they were in the position of advising without the authority to implement or make major funding decisions. Participants were recruited through Internet research, personal networks, and snowball sampling. All of the participants were located in the United States and only two mentioned working internationally. They worked across a variety of industries, including corporate, not-for-profit, government, and education institutions. I approached the interviews as collaborative reflections on the tensions involved in consultants' work in accordance with an empathetic interviewing style (Fontana & Frey, 2005). Given that my own position influences the interview process, I framed interviews as an opportunity to put forth the assumptions, questions, and thoughts I had gathered from previous research for critique and "correction" by the interviewees. This was intended to further develop the dialogical exchange in which consultants and I both shared and expanded our capacities for interpretation of (and potentially action through) diversity work (Frank, 2005). My goal was to foster a dialogue based "on perpetual openness to other's capacity to *become something other* than whoever she or he already is" (p. 967). Several consultants confirmed this approach suggesting that it was helpful to talk through their own ideas in the interviews. Consequently, the analysis and conclusion of the project are meant to contribute to this process of becoming, rather than providing conclusive evaluations.

The majority of the interviews took place over the phone, with the exception of two that were completed in local coffee shops. Interviews lasted between 50 and 100 minutes and were recorded with the permission of the participant.[1] Questions during the interview focused on consultants' histories, what they had learned from experience in the profession, the obstacles they had faced, and how they coped with

1. One consultant preferred that I not record the interview and so I took detailed notes during the interview and wrote a summary immediately following.

these obstacles. With the help of one research assistant, I transcribed the interviews with attention primarily to content. I reviewed all transcripts to ensure accuracy and then sent each to the consultant offering them the opportunity to clarify or respond as they deemed necessary. Transcripts ranged from 10 to 23 pages, for a total of 267 pages of single-spaced data.

Using the qualitative analysis software AltasTI,[2] I used an open coding method, identifying all the ideas in each paragraph. Open coding resulted in 150 distinct codes, which I used to revisit the early interviews in a second analysis. In line with grounded methods (Charmaz, 2000), transcription and analysis of early transcripts occurred concurrently with later interviews and helped make sense of emerging themes. Drawing on the original coding, I discerned two types of tensions: "practical tensions" and "discursive tensions." Practical tensions included difficulties or challenges explicitly described by the participants, such as gaining access to organizations, overcoming resistance from participants, or garnering financial or symbolic buy-in from organizational leaders. Discursive tensions were not specifically described as difficult, but surfaced as tensions, contradictions, or inconsistencies within or across interviews. These included the two tensions that are the focus of this analysis—the tension between broad and narrow constructions of human differences and the tension between emphasizing change at the organizational and individual levels. Another example of discursive tension that emerged was the (in)stability tension, the desire to disrupt existing discourses and practices while also drawing on those discourses and practices as a resource. These two types of tensions were related. Practical tensions often underpinned discursive tensions. As consultants attempted to navigate the practical tensions of their work, they drew on seemingly contradictory discourses to meet those challenges. I identified a discursive tension as a "discursive paradox" if it served a necessary function for consultants as they engaged the practical tensions of their work.

2. AtlasTI is Qualitative Analysis software. Each interview was uploaded into the program and manually coded as an individual document. Although software such as this can be used to create automatic coding schemes, no such functions were used in this analysis. The system primarily allowed me to analyze similarly coded material with greater ease.

I have chosen the broad/narrow and individual/institutional discursive tensions as the focus of this analysis due to the historical legacy of diversity work. Both reflect tensions resulting from merging histories of social justice work with organizational imperatives. Narrow inclusion of difference is based on social justice discourse, whereas broad definitions are based on organizational discourse. Likewise, comprehensive organizational change is often the preferred method for challenging systemic inequalities that social justice seeks to address, but an individual focus often results from organizational constraints and a focus on individual productivity. Furthermore, these tensions play a significant role across the four flows, and consequently, in the constitution of what counts as diversity work and how it "should" be done. The first tension addresses the "Who" of diversity work by delineating what groups diversity work should focus on. The latter addresses the "How" of diversity work, by addressing how consultants should strategically focus their change efforts. Ultimately, the ideal image of what diversity work "should be" is at stake in these tensions. Executed diversity initiatives are then evaluated according to this discursively constructed ideal.

Yet this analysis illustrates that the ideal image of diversity work need not resolve these tensions by determining one element as superior to the other. By illustrating how consultants kept these tensions open to maintain the possibility of change through their work, this analysis focuses on the navigation of these tensions as a defining feature of diversity work. Consequently, this project does not determine best practices for resolving these tensions—instead, it opens up possibilities for scholars and practitioners to develop contextually appropriate readings and responses to these tensions in their own research and practice. This approach is decidedly grounded in the perspectives and sensemaking structures of the diversity professionals who are the actors at the very center of constituting diversity work. The refusal to resolve these tensions is intended to leave actors with "breathing room for choice and action" (Holstein & Gubrium, 2005, p. 497). Thus, this analysis should be evaluated in terms of its usefulness (Charmaz, 2000); not by providing prescribed actions, but by adding to the repertoire of knowledge, skills, and strategies that consultants might use when navigating the tensions of their work.

Paradox and Possibilities

Taking diversity consultants' talk about diversity as constitutive of diversity work, this analysis draws out two significant discursive paradoxes that were especially relevant to the four flows. The first one addresses what differences are considered relevant to diversity. This surfaces as a tension between defining diversity as addressing a narrow range of differences associated with historically disadvantaged groups and a broad range associated with any kind of difference significant in the workplace (e.g., personality, management styles, etc.). A second paradox emerged between interventions aimed at individuals and those focused on achieving change at the organizational level. These tensions in the discourse of diversity work mark undetermined moments where consultants are actively negotiating the definition and constitution of diversity work. It is precisely in the possibility proffered by these tensions that possibilities for diversity work might flourish.

Definitions in Tension: Broad/Organizational Versus Narrow/Historical

The historical emergence of diversity work as a merger of organizational imperatives and historical inequalities manifested in consultants' talk as tensions in the definition of diversity. At times, these definitions included any difference relevant to an organization, whereas at other times they included differences that have been subject to historical inequality. In contrast to popular interpretations of diversity as referencing historically disadvantaged groups, the following are a series of responses consultants offered when asked to define what diversity is.

> Diversity in general, I think, is getting what you want done using all the talent you have regardless of differences that you can see and can't see.

> [I]t's a business imperative. It's how we relate to and ensure that we are serving the customer base and the community as well as providing opportunities for our employees to feel

> like they have fair and equitable opportunities for advancement in the company.
>
> [D]iversity is trying to create work environments and organizations that are respectful, inclusive, and productive. And those don't always gel together.
>
> [I]n particular it's about trying to figure out how to move organizations to embrace different ways of doing things and thinking about things so that they are creating an environment that is attractive to a wide group of people and that actually supports their success within that organization. What we are really interested in is the knowledge and the skills that you need to manage whatever differences influence how you get business results.

Each of these examples explicitly connects differences to organizations: organizational management, environment, processes, goals, and individual opportunity. Despite the historical legacy of diversity work in racial and sexual equality movements and popular interpretations that connect diversity to historically disadvantaged groups, when asked directly, consultants often gave precedence to organizationally based definitions of diversity rather than definitions based on histories of oppression.

Yet, this framing of diversity was negotiated throughout the interviews. One consultant acknowledged the historical legacy that diversity consulting owes to race and gender equality movements, but she clarified that "we have moved considerably away from that—or not away from that, but in addition to that." Her own correction signals an attempt to navigate these two different ways of defining what differences "count" as part of diversity. The four flows framework is helpful in parsing apart the productive navigation of these discursive paradoxes. The above-mentioned definitions focus on institutional positioning with an implicit audience of an organizational gatekeeper evaluating the worth of a diversity initiative. Although the message might also contribute to the self-structuring flow, it does little to describe how work should be done or who is involved.

Membership negotiation is another flow that lends itself to a broad definition of diversity. Several consultants cited popular interpretations of the term *diversity* as a euphemism for race and gender as a major "misunderstanding" of diversity work and a significant source of frustration. Here, one consultant describes his experience with a group of White men:

> Then when we started talking about [diversity] they all kind of started complaining and sharing all of, I guess, their negative experiences with the whole topic of diversity and how they said I don't even like the word diversity. Then I showed them this model that I just talked about and they all went, "Oh, I'm in that model."

This excerpt reflects one of the practical tensions that consultants faced: overcoming resistance. To include the White men in the initiative, this consultant used a broad definition that led participants to see themselves as part of a diversity initiative. This strategy risks "recentering whiteness," a process described by Grimes (2002) in which diversity initiatives take White people as their primary audience and concern. This also demonstrates the (in)stability tension as it draws on discourses of Whiteness as a resource for gaining buy-in even though the process is ultimately intended to disrupt Whiteness.

In later interviews I asked several consultants how they balanced a broad definition of diversity with one that focuses on historically oppressed groups. One consultant explained that she is "definitely talking about traditional social identities groups," but she also, "see(s) it as a very broad concept." She went on to explain how these two work together:

> And I also caution my clients to pay attention to the populations that have not been well represented in their organizations before. So, for me, diversity is a broad concept and *in any institution there will be priorities based on that institution's history, background, leadership, and what the numbers look like around traditionally underrepresented groups.* So the law firms are really—the number of women, the number of

> people of color who have been in law firms and moving up in law firms are extremely limited. And so a lot of our work are [sic.] in those areas. Some of our work is sexual orientation. Some of our work is on religion and language. But a lot of it is very focused on those two populations: women and people of color. (My emphasis)

Another consultant demonstrated a similar strategy by gathering data on the client organization:

> I can think of a client I was just working with, and they have a broad definition of diversity. But based on their statistics they also have disparate turnover of African Americans. And so when I was working with them I was saying, "OK, you have this broad issue, but you also have clearly this disparity with African Americans, you cannot side step that."

The flow at stake here is activity coordination. The broad definition of diversity may guide member negotiation and institutional positioning, but when it comes to strategic execution and prioritizing actions, these consultants returned to a narrow definition of diversity. This is possible because when the immediate exigencies are identified for action, the context and history of the organization provide a focus on historically disadvantaged groups. In these examples, the broad range did not necessarily supplant the more narrow range. It allowed the consultants to maintain a particular institutional positioning and membership negotiation strategy while depending on context to focus on historically oppressed groups when it was time to coordinate and prioritize activities of the initiative.

What To Do?: Individuals and Organizations

A second discursive paradox emerged among consultants as they defined the goals and success of diversity work as individual and/or organizational:

> It really is that it's hard to change a culture without changing individual perceptions and it's hard to change individual

> behavior without changing culture. Right, so, change has to happen on as many levels as the barriers do; as the bias does. So the bias happens on a personal, the interpersonal, the institutional, and the cultural, and all the things that we do have to be aimed at all of those levels. You know, so it is a cultural change process that involves changing individuals and it also involves changing policies, and then it also involves changing people's behaviors, and also affecting what the underlying culture of that organization is. And those are all part of one thing.

Creating a change initiative that functions at multiple levels requires extensive knowledge, skill, time, and resources. Consultants are faced with the task of breaking this broad and comprehensive process into a series of processes that can be achieved given the conditions of the organization and the consultant.

The majority of consultants preferred long-term organizational change work rather than short-term projects addressing individual behaviors. At the same time, many consultants also noted that having the necessary resources and access to organizations for such initiatives was rare. Consider the following two examples:

> It's more of a check off the box experience that the leaders are supporting as opposed to even forcing themselves to make the linkage as to how this is going to make the organization better and transform the organization.

> I usually find I can frame the work in terms of social justice, in terms of antioppression, and that the leadership will buy into that as long as it's about personal development. But as soon as it becomes about making fundamental changes to the institution as an organization, that is when they start back peddling.

Only a few firms in the country have the clout and financial stability to require this kind of commitment from client organizations. When asked about things she had learned over the years, one consultant explained how early in her career she refused work if organizations

would not sign on for a comprehensive cultural change process. She has since learned that winning contracts requires that she be more flexible. Others mentioned lowered expectations as part of their learning over the years.

This discursive paradox begins to draw out the complication of constituting a diversity initiative among the constitutive practices of a larger organization. Although one participant expressed a self-structuring norm that "change has to happen on as many levels as the barriers do, as the bias does," she relied on the organization to have a similar self-structuring norm to execute an extended engagement. If there is a lack of alignment, this can force a compromise of an ideal self-structuring norm that focuses on broad organizational change. Without some effort to align with the self-structuring norms of the organization, consultants risk losing the opportunity to impact the organization at all.

Consequently, comprehensive organizational change was not the only way consultants talked about the self-structuring goals of their work. There was also a discourse among consultants that focused more on the personal and interpersonal aspects of diversity. Many experienced consultants critiqued diversity work focused largely on individual behavior, explaining that if organizations do not support, encourage, and reward a change in behavior, then individuals will simply slide back into old ways that fit comfortably with the organizational structure. However, two consultants emphasized interpersonal relationships as driving their work. One of them did so in light of the constraints on comprehensive organizational change. When I asked what success looked like for him, he responded as follows:

> I mean, I'm a firm believer—I love the notion that there is going to be some organizational transformation et cetera et cetera—but if I am walking out of the experience feeling like one or two people out of the twenty have a deeper relationship I feel happy.

This consultant is a "firm believer" and "loves" organizational transformation, however that is not how he measures his success at the end of the day. Instead, he counts himself successful if he has positively affected a single person thus shifting his self-structuring goal to fit his situation.

His statement also helps to clarify a clear tension that surfaced in other interviews. Many consultants stated goals that focused primarily on organizational outcomes, yet when I pressed consultants to give me an example of a time they felt successful, a contradiction emerged. Although only one other consultant stated her goals as primarily individual, when recounting past success, many consultants cited individual change. For example, descriptions of success included: "When either the client or a participant in the workshop has that epiphany—has that ah-ha moment"; "just seeing an individual have the light bulb go on, when they can acknowledge something about themselves, which helps to catapult them to the next step in their own individual journey"; "there's one person that's becoming passionate about this and if they're going to go out and touch other people then, like I said, my efforts are doubled." This common response of individually focused success is paradoxical in light of a stated focus on organizational processes and culture. This tension between focusing on organizational structures and individual behaviors is partially explained by the tension between consultants' preferences and the limitations of any specific organizational engagement. It also emerged that when clients' self-structuring messages did not support institutional change, consultants created new ways of explaining how their activities support their self-structuring ideal for institutional change.

Accordingly, there are two strategies that emerged for navigating this tension: one involved the construction and use of "spaces," and the other was to position themselves as playing a part in a process, even if they could not control or witness the whole process. Illustrating the latter, consultants linked the individual and the organizational by framing personal changes as opening the possibility for future change rather than evidence that change was completed. In other words, consultants had not simply affected individuals as an end in themselves, but (as demonstrated in the above statements) sent individuals on a "journey" or enabled them to "touch other people." Even when counting individual change as their success, consultants kept an eye on the capacity for larger organizational (or even social) change to occur. In doing so, they positioned themselves as a single part of a change process, rather than someone who controlled a complete process of change. This strategy of positioning individual changes (that they were able to affect) as instigating or starting a process that they might not be able to fully affect on their own, allowed them to bridge

the tension between a preference for organizational-based change and the constraints that limit them to immediate success at an individual level. At the same time, it maintained their self-structuring principle that prioritized broad organizationally based initiatives.

Another way consultants framed the relationship between organizational work and individual work was through talk about their work as "creating spaces" and "creating environments." The creation of spaces and environments during workshops, trainings, or retreats indicated a marked suspension of traditional norms of interaction surrounding human difference to open the possibility for new norms of interaction to emerge under their direction within that space. Although consultants most directly create space at a training or workshop, they hoped that the "space" might transfer back to the organizational environment more broadly. For example,

> What I try to do is create a situation in a firm where people make it okay to ask for help and to not have all the answers. And so what we're really trying to do is to dismantle some of the arrogance and create a little bit more of what we call a learning organization. A culture that says, "I'm smarter if I can capitalize on your experience."

Like the individual markers of success, workshop and training spaces are not ends in themselves. Thus, consultants used the workshops, which they have greater control over, to create a space in which individuals are changed, and then hoped that the individuals would recreate that "space" in the broader organization.

In connection with the first strategy related to process, these spaces were meant to create the possibility for personal processes of change. Although spaces are organized phenomena, several consultants framed them as fostering conditions under which people could continue to change themselves:

> I think it's about creating a safe place, and then having substantive content. And then the content will allow them to go where they need to go in terms of their own introspection and challenging themselves around where they are with regard to some of these pretty emotional issues, whether it's

> sexual orientation or race or whatever so that the trainers don't have to confront them. The learning experience will cause them to challenge themselves.

This illustrates the intersection of process approaches and space approaches to this paradox: consultants can create spaces and instigate a process of change, but cannot control the complete process.

Thus, although consultants' talk about diversity reflected a tension in which they stated a preference for broad organizational changes, they focused on individual change due to limited resources and opportunities. Framing their work in terms of process and creating spaces were strategies consultants used to navigate this tension as a paradox. It also allowed them to maintain their self-structuring principle that broad organizational change is a goal superior to individual change. Although the success of such strategies cannot be determined through interviews, identifying them creates the possibility for scholars and practitioners to refine how these strategies might work. Again, this paradoxical focus on organizational and individual change does not mark a fissure in two different kinds of diversity work, but rather a point of possibility, where organizational change can be thought of in terms of individual change and vice versa. Navigating this paradox allows consultants to pursue organizational change, where the constraints of the organizational encounter might appear prohibitive.

Consequently, both these discursive tensions open the possibility for change. The broad definitions of diversity can be strategically deployed in member negotiation and self-structuring, while the narrow definition is simultaneously used to coordinate action and set priorities. Similarly, the focus on individual change offers a potential entry point for broader organizational change. While scholarly debates sometimes cast these discursive tensions as problematic challenges with clear winners and losers in a game of appropriation, the evidence here suggests that these paradoxical discourses have productive potential in the hands of an adept diversity professional. It is this productive potential that makes these not only discursive tensions, but discursive paradox. The seemingly competing discourses are actually a definitive feature of diversity consultants' engagement with organizational norms, structures, goals, and priorities.

Conclusion

This study began with two objectives: First, it sought to approach diversity work from the perspective of the professionals who create and conduct diversity initiatives, and second, it sought to use that perspective to highlight the tensions inherent to diversity work. This involved using (what I have called) a tensional approach that examines how diversity professionals navigate discursive tension in their everyday work. By focusing on the voices of diversity professionals, this analysis challenges the conclusions of scholars (Grimes, 2002; Jonsen et al., 2013; Oseen, 1997) who have suggested that emphasizing financial imperatives of organizations that conduct diversity work compromises attention to historically disadvantaged groups. While the warnings offered by these scholars merit attention, their conclusions are often limited by an analytical focus on popular-press materials, short speeches, policies, or other artifacts that fail to account for the dynamic, multi-layered processes that constitute diversity work. By showing how consultants navigate the challenges of engaging organizations and coping with organizational priorities, this analysis reveals more nuanced practices diversity professionals use to leverage different discourses throughout their process of organizational change. Whereas other studies have highlighted how dominant financial and racial discourses influence diversity professionals, this study highlights how those professionals shape those discourses in turn, by embracing the tensions that define their work.

In accordance with the suggestion that histories should be considered when analyzing tensions (Trethewey & Ashcraft, 2004), this work traces the tensions between organizational and social justice discourses to the historical emergence of diversity work. Consequently, this discursive tension is not simply an obstacle but a defining feature of diversity work. It is a direct consequence of bringing social justice objectives to bear in organizational contexts. As such, this tension should be embraced as a productive paradox and defining feature of diversity work. This does not mean that debates over professional strategies that rely more on social justice rather than organizational discourses (or vice versa) are moot, but it suggests that such debates should serve consultants who navigate these tensions in their work. The evidence in this analysis supports Trethewey and

Ashcraft's claim that tension is "an inevitable partner of social and organizational change; that is, paradox and contradiction necessarily accompany efforts to do things differently amid entrenched systems and habits" (p. 171). Embracing this paradox in theory and praxis is relevant not only to diversity work, but to any organizational change effort that has a legacy in a broader social movement—for example, environmentalism, which surfaces in organizational sustainability initiatives, and public health campaigns, which emerge in organizations' health and well-being programs.

Perhaps more importantly, this analysis highlights how the CCO four flows framework provides an exacting theoretical tool for discerning how socially motivated professionals use discursive tensions to foster organizational change. For example, this analytical framework adds nuance to Tatli's (2011) conclusion that, whereas discourses of diversity use a broad definition of diversity based on the business case, the practices of diversity still focus on historically disadvantaged groups. For consultants participating in this study, the broad definition of diversity served their need for institutional positioning and member negotiation while still allowing for elements of the narrow definition to emerge in activity coordination and the execution of specific initiatives. The four flows approach also reminds scholars and practitioners that single messages can influence multiple flows with unintended effects. Consequently, when pursuing socially motivated change with organizations, professionals should consider each strategic move in light of the benefits and risks it portends to each of the flows. For example, the broad definition of diversity might subtly "recenter" Whiteness as a self-structuring principle by implying that White people are the "normal" workers, as highlighted by Grimes (2002). Ultimately, subtle attention to how diversity consultants and other professionals serve the four flows at different times will allow them to more skillfully execute socially motivated organizational change.

This analysis also emphasizes the agency of diversity professionals by focusing on their skills rather than focusing on prescribed "best practices," as if the practices themselves (devoid of the skills of those who execute them) were the sole determinants of success. As with any organizational change that pursues social motives, there are diversity professionals who are more or less skilled in their work. Still, this analysis refutes criticism that casts these professionals as dupes

of organizational discourses that dictate their work (Cavanaugh, 1997; Lasch-Quinn, 2003; Lynch, 2002). Focusing on the skills and agency of socially motivated professionals is necessary if we are to take seriously a CCO approach, because it locates them at the center of the communication practices that constitute the meaning and effects of socially motivated initiatives in organizational contexts. As Ahmed (2007a) explains, "We can hence speculate that the success of 'diversity' depends on the extent to which practitioners can determine the condition of its circulation, by determining 'what sticks'" (p. 240). This study focuses sharply on those navigational strategies that diversity professionals use to circulate the meanings and focus of diversity work, as well as the strategies they use to get their changes to "stick" in organizational contexts.

For diversity practitioners, the results of this study offer new tools for strategically analyzing and negotiating the competing demands of social justice and organizational priorities. In addition to analyzing how broad and narrow definitions of diversity might be leveraged, or have unintended effects on the four flows, close analysis of the tensions between individually and organizationally focused diversity initiatives draws attention to the ways consultants *must* construct their diversity initiatives according to a specific organizational context. While consultants espouse a self-structuring preference for organizational-level interventions, they concurrently coordinate specific activities that constitute a diversity initiative. In spite of these constraints, consultants' commitment to comprehensive engagement prompt creative strategies, including focusing on sustaining change processes beyond their direct influence and the creation of "spaces" that ultimately transfer from training locations back to workplaces. Other socially motivated consultants might focus on using these strategies intentionally. However, the disjunctures between the self-structuring messages of organizations and ideal comprehensive diversity initiatives serve as limiting factors in the pursuit of long-term change. This suggests that diversity consultants might focus on coordinating an initiative's four flows with an organization's, or at the very least, leveraging areas of overlap to achieve the greatest impact.

Applying tensional strategies to investigate other areas of socially motivated change may reveal similar opportunities for practitioners.

Sustainability, well-being, and other organizational change efforts share challenges in developing self-structuring principles that adapt and merge with organizational priorities. This analysis suggests that tensions resulting from these mergers should be maintained as productive points that foster possibilities for change. Likewise, developing strategies for deploying fragmented discourses in service of different constitutive flows may prove more effective than debating "best practices" in the hopes of a singular ideal strategy or discourse. Fragmented discourses enable histories of social change to survive in an organizational context, and shift organizational discourses in significant ways. Different definitions of "what counts" as environmental impact or well-being may proffer discursive tensions that prove productive in creating organizational change, just as broad and narrow definitions of diversity generate discursive paradox. On a more strategic note, those charged with advancing social change in an organizational context might follow the lead of diversity practitioners by focusing on the ways individual change can be leveraged into organizational change in the absence of institutional support for such change.

Additional research using tensional methods is merited to discover the discursive paradoxes that exist in other areas. Diversity researchers might work more closely with consultants to examine how these strategies are implemented and their degree of success. While interviews offer insight into the sensemaking strategies of consultants, they do little to reveal material practice. Furthermore, a better understanding of organizational discourses could be achieved through direct engagement with organizations that conduct diversity initiatives.

In summary, by combining a tensional approach with a four flows theory of CCO, this study has analyzed consultants' strategies for negotiating two constitutive tensions of diversity work. These strategies guide consultants as they navigate the competing discourses that constitute diversity work while experiencing organizational constraints. They may also guide those seeking to make other forms of socially motivated change in organizational contexts. For scholars, this study demonstrates how tensional analysis can be combined with the four flows theory of CCO to create an analytic framework for examining change efforts among established organizations. At the

core of these conclusions is a focus on diversity practitioners' voices and their powerful roles in the constitution of diversity work. Their ability to navigate and sustain discursive paradoxes is not problematic; it is a definitive skill of diversity work, and holds the possibility for change.

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