Mapping out the field of equality and diversity: Rise of individualism and voluntarism

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Abstract
Drawing on 66 interviews with key actors in the equality and diversity field in the UK, we operationalize Bourdieu’s conception of the field, across the axes of individualism versus collectivism and regulation versus voluntarism, and map out the location of the key actors in this field. The contribution of this article is three-fold. First, we advance the understanding of the equality and diversity field at national level by analysing the accounts of the influential actors, whose interests and actions shape the field. Second, the article illustrates how the multi-actor and contested nature of the equality and diversity field manifests in these accounts, and presents evidence in support of policy and strategic thinking that goes beyond a single-actor focus. Finally, we contribute to the theoretical maturity and expansion of the equality and diversity scholarship through the use of Bourdieuan sociology.

Keywords
Bourdieu, collectivism, diversity, equality, the field, individualism, regulation, voluntarism

Introduction
It is nothing new to state that there are multiple stakeholders with different and often conflicting interests in the field of equality and diversity (Agócs and Burr, 1996). Still,
as Zanoni and Janssens (2007) state, most of the diversity research is conducted with managers and employers. There has been a limited number of studies that explore the perspectives of actors other than employers, such as trade unions (e.g. Kirton and Greene, 2002, 2006) and individual employees (e.g. Dick and Cassell, 2002; Zanoni and Janssens, 2007). However, studies that involve multiple actors in the field of equality and diversity are few and far between. The small number of multi-actor works that exist are either in the form of monographs (e.g. Greene and Kirton, 2009; Özbilgin and Tatli, 2008) or in the form of case studies that investigate key stakeholders in a sectoral context (e.g. Healy and Oikelome, 2007). Healy and Oikelome’s (2007) study of National Health Service (NHS) trust provides an example of the interrelationships between different stakeholders (e.g. trade unions, black networks, identity and community groups and employees) that influence the equality and diversity agenda. The study provides an in-depth exploration of the case of equality and diversity in a particular sector rather than focusing on what we provide in this article, i.e. mapping out the roles of actors in the wider equality and diversity field.

The contribution of this article is three-fold. First, we contribute to the understanding of the multi-actor context of equality and diversity by bringing together a wide range of actors, who represent key institutional influences at national level. Our overarching aim is then to provide a broad picture of the competing agendas and interests in the equality and diversity field in the UK context on the basis of original empirical evidence. Unpacking the landscape of multiple and competing voices in this field is also essential for understanding the temporal, negotiated and political nature of the equality and diversity policies and practices. So, our second contribution, as scholars who are committed to promoting equality and fairness in practice, is strategic and policy-based. In a multi-actor context, governmental policies and organizational practices that focus on a single actor, such as employees, remain partial in promoting progressive change and debate in the field of equality and diversity. We argue that effective, sustainable and robust policy and practice at national and organizational levels should be based on an empirically- and theoretically-grounded understanding of the equality and diversity field. Such an understanding requires a commitment to explore the contested nature of the multi-actor setting in the field of equality and diversity. Finally, we contribute to the theoretical maturity and expansion of the field. Zanoni et al. (2010) point out that, notwithstanding the growing amount of critical diversity research, this area is still in need of theoretical and conceptual improvement. In this article, we respond to this call and offer a sociological framing of the equality and diversity landscape by adopting French sociologist Bourdieu’s concept of the field. The article maps out the equality and diversity field as a space of social relations between key institutional actors, and locates the positions that these actors occupy in the field in their struggle to gain access to legitimacy and power through an analysis of in-depth interviews. We demonstrate that two pillars of the diversity management paradigm, i.e. individualism and voluntarism, characterize the dominant positions that actors take in the field of equality and diversity in the UK, and unpack the legitimacy struggles that craft power relations in this field through the use of Bourdieuan sociology.

One of the most radical changes in the field of equality and diversity in North America has been the introduction of the managing diversity approach in the early 1990s. Diversity management can be defined as a management philosophy of recognizing and valuing
heterogeneity in organizations with a view to improve organizational performance (Thomas, 1990). This approach was offered as an alternative to equal opportunities in the UK (Kandola and Fullerton, 1998). The shift from equal opportunities to diversity management was concurrent with some significant changes in the political economy towards liberalization, and deregulation, in the USA (Kelly and Dobbin, 1998) and in the UK (Lorbiecki and Jack, 2000). As such, this shift was marked by a move away from the emotive approach and the legal case for equality and elimination of group-based structural disadvantage, towards the individualized and performance-driven business case arguments that were advocated by diversity management scholars (Barmes and Ashtiany, 2003). Dick and Cassell (2002) identify that contemporary equality and diversity research is characterized by polarized and partisan approaches. They note that the mainstream scholars wooed the diversity management paradigm as a positive development that transcends the alleged pitfalls of traditional equality frameworks. On the other hand, critical scholars were alarmed by potentially regressive implications of individualistic and business case driven diversity perspectives for fairness at work.

There have been many attempts at improving the vision of diversity management through critical lenses of management and industrial relations scholarship. It is suggested that the utilitarian logic of the business case and voluntarist perspectives may have regressive equality outcomes if differences are deemed relevant only when they are compatible with bottom line demands (Jack and Lorbiecki, 2007). For example, Noon (2007) identified the negative consequences of business case driven diversity approaches for race equality (see also Wrench, 2005). He argued that, unlike the universal coverage of legal and ethical cases, the business case for diversity is contingent upon the labour market context and organizational competitive strategies. The contingent nature of the business case arguments, in turn, may lead to a pick and mix approach in dealing with (or omitting) workplace equality and diversity issues. Further adding to such concerns, the evidence on the business case for diversity shows that diversity does not always lead to positive performance outcomes (Williams and O’Reilly, 1998). In his recent article, Noon (2010) proposed the adoption of a legally-driven positive discrimination approach in order to redress historical and structural inequalities and disadvantage at work.

Diversity management approaches are also critiqued as a management tool to undermine the identity-based collectivism in organizations and to obscure group-based systemic inequalities (Kirby and Harter, 2003; Woodhams and Danieli, 2000). Tatli (2011), in her study on the diversity practices and discourses in the private sector organizations in the UK, shows that the shift from equal opportunities to diversity management approaches has been only partial. She argues that a shift is evident in the discursive representations of the practice rather than the practice itself. Demonstrating that organizations did not move away from traditional equal opportunities practices, despite the popularity of business case-based managing diversity discourses, Tatli urges equality and diversity scholars to question whether private sector organizations are truly convinced about the business case or rather they use the business case simply as an ideological apparatus to advocate deregulation and voluntarism.

Despite the polarization between the mainstream and critical diversity approaches (Dick and Cassell, 2002), there is not a single, consolidated view of equality and diversity, but instead there are competing perspectives in line with the multiplicity of vested
interests of multiple stakeholder groups (Tatli and Özbilgin, 2009). As pointed out at the outset of this article, there is a tension between the performance-focused managing diversity approaches (e.g. Brammer et al., 2009; Joshi et al., 2006) and the humanitarian-based equal opportunities approaches (e.g. Ogbonna and Harris, 2006; Pringle 2008). Moving away from this polarization, Jonsen et al. (2011) recently argued that both critical and mainstream variants of diversity research are characterized by a western bias in terms of the choice of categories of difference and the debates for and against the business case. Therefore, the field of equality and diversity accommodates competing interests and actors who uphold them. Choices of different perspectives to equality and diversity are not haphazard. Instead, they are often used as frames for allocating resources, prioritizing certain concerns while silencing others. Therefore, our key question is: how can we map the equality and diversity field as a social space generated through the struggle and competition between different institutional actors? The article is structured as follows: first, the Bourdieuan notion of the field is introduced and the field of equality and diversity is conceptualized; next, we describe the research methods, data collection and sample of this study; finally, the findings of the qualitative study are presented and the implications and meaning of the findings are discussed.

**Conceptualizing the field of equality and diversity**

In this article, we use Bourdieu’s notion of the field in order to conceptualize and empirically explore the field of equality and diversity. In their 2005 review article, Özbilgin and Tatli commended use of Bourdieuan sociology in order to advance theorizing organizations. During the ensuing years, Bourdieuan concepts have become increasingly popular among organization and management scholars (see Doherty and Dickmann, 2009; O’Mahoney, 2007) and equality and diversity researchers (e.g. Al Ariss and Syed, 2011; Tatli, 2011). However, Bourdieu’s work is also criticized for failing to explain change and drawing a static picture of the society (Vandenberghe, 1999). These critiques are often misplaced because, for Bourdieu, change is not impossible but difficult to achieve (Nash, 2003). Bourdieu is critical of a notion of a society that is envisioned as in continuous flux of change. Instead, he argues that change is slow and rare owing to the deeply embedded mechanisms of inertia in the field (Bourdieu, 2010). For Bourdieu (1990, 1998), the social world is made up of fields, which are semi-autonomous, relational and multi-dimensional social spaces. These social spaces are configurations of relations between positions occupied by individuals or institutions. Bourdieu (1998: 31) explains why he describes the field as a social space as follows:

The notion of space contains, in itself, the principle of a relational understanding of the social world... apparent, directly visible beings, whether individuals or groups, exist and subsist in and through difference; that is, they occupy relative positions in space of a relations which, is... the real principle of the behaviour of individuals and groups. (Italics in original)

As such, through the notion of the field as a social space, Bourdieu introduces the principle of relationality as a key to understanding the social world. Similarly, in this article we conceptualize the field of equality and diversity as a space of relations between
different institutional actors, i.e. statutory equality bodies, public and private sector organizations, professional bodies and learned organizations, trade unions, employer organizations, consultancies and training organizations. If the first principle that defines a field is that of relationality (i.e. what makes a field is the relationships between the actors), the second are the power structures within a given field that generate position taking by the actors in it (i.e. what defines a field is the position of different actors in relation to each other across a matrix of power). Bourdieu (1998) sees the field at the same time as a field of forces, in that several rules are imposed on the actors, and as a field of struggles, in the sense that actors engage in competition and confrontation to conserve or transform the rules of the field in which they are located. Jenkins (1992: 85) interprets this double scope of Bourdieuan field as follows:

(Field is) a structured system of social positions – occupied either by individuals or institutions – the nature of which defines the situation for their occupants. It is also a system of forces, which exist between these positions; a field is structured internally in terms of power relations. Positions stand in relationship of domination, subordination and equivalence to each other by virtue of the access they afford to the goods and resources (capital).

Accordingly, every field is ‘the locus of power relationships (and of struggles aiming to transform or maintain them)’ (Bourdieu, 1990: 141), and agents are positioned in a field in a differentiated manner in line with their competing, even antagonistic, interests and dispositions, that are products of contextual and historical conditions. The relationship between the agents and their positioning in a given field is characterized by a struggle over gaining symbolic domination for ‘the production and imposition of a legitimate vision of the social world’ (Bourdieu, 1990: 137). Bourdieu (1990: 135–7) accords symbolic power in a field to the power of worldmaking through consolidating a monopoly over producing the common sense of the world and legitimate naming. However, the symbolic monopoly is never complete and fields are constantly and dynamically generated, reproduced and sometimes transformed through power struggles between institutional or individual actors, who compete for appropriation of the power and resources through which they obtain legitimacy to impose their vision (Swartz, 1997). In other words:

In any given social formation, the agencies which objectively lay claim to the legitimate exercise of a power of symbolic imposition and, in so doing, tend to claim the monopoly on legitimacy enter into relations of competition, i.e. power relations and symbolic relations whose structure expresses in its own logic the state of the balance of power between the groups. (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1990: 18)

For us, using a Bourdieuan conception of the field enables an understanding of the equality and diversity field both as relational and dynamic. The actors in this field are not indifferent bystanders, but strategic actors who seek to shape equality and diversity agendas, with a view to affect the distribution of political and other forms of power in work settings. For that reason, this article maps out the position of different actors across the equality and diversity field along the parameters that are the main frontiers of confrontation. We identify two such frontiers of differentiation and struggle between equality and
diversity actors: voluntarism versus regulation, and individualism versus collectivism. These four dimensions are commonly used in the industrial relations research as markers of the ways in which national employment relations systems are structured. These dimensions are also often used for exploring the relationships between trade unions and employers, who, as Heery and Frege (2006) point out, have been the focus of traditional industrial research. In recent years, there has been growing scepticism about the narrow focus on unions and employers at the expense of other key actors who influence (and are influenced by) employment relations but remain outside the nexus of a union-employer bargaining relationship (Kaufman, 2008). Identified among the non-union actors in industrial relations are supranational institutions such as the EU (Teague, 2009), community-based organizations (Osterman, 2006), various state institutions (Gospel and Pendleton, 2003), social movement and advocacy bodies, and service provider institutions, such as advisory bodies and management consultants (Heery and Frege, 2006).

In a similar vein, our article is based on a recognition that the field of equality and diversity encompasses a wide array of key actors, including equality bodies, public and private sector organizations, professional bodies, learned organizations, trade unions, employer organizations, consultancies and training organizations. These actors are positioned in the field in terms of their approaches towards the tensions between voluntarism and regulation, and individualism and collectivism.

Voluntarism is the political philosophy that institutions should take actions without constraints and coercive measures (Verba et al., 1995). Conversely, regulation as a political philosophy is underpinned by the recognition that institutional decisions and processes should be controlled through state laws or institutional rules (Stigler, 1971). Brown (1993) frames individualism as a political philosophy, which places individual interests at the core of all political processes. As such, individualism is predicated upon the idea of independence of the individual from collectives, which, in turn, implies a management style that is based on direct interaction between the employer and the individual worker (Storey and Bacon, 1993). Collectivism, on the other hand, is a philosophy that is underpinned by ideas of solidarity among individuals with shared interests (Triandis and Gelfand, 1998) and foresees the presence of collective representation bodies to articulate common interests (Purcell, 1987). However, this framework of ideal types across the axes of voluntarism versus regulation and individualism versus collectivism should be used with caution and with a recognition that empirical cases are often placed across the continuum rather than at the extremities of these axes. For instance, although voluntarism is associated with a process of deregulation of market and employment relations, it does not suggest an absence of state intervention. In fact, both regulation and deregulation of markets and employment relations are achieved through state intervention (Peck, 2001). Similarly, pragmatic dualism, rather than pure individualism or pure collectivism, is the feature of employment relations in reality (Bacon and Storey, 2000).

There are two reasons for our decision to choose these two distinct continuums to map out the equality and diversity field, and to position the key institutional actors. First, the existing academic literature on equality and diversity puts a significant emphasis on the tension between voluntarism and regulation on the one hand, and individualism and collectivism on the other (Dickens, 2007; Lucio and Perrett, 2009). Furthermore, our interviews showed that the symbolic struggle of ‘legitimate naming’ in the equality and diversity
field in the UK took place in relation to imposing a specific vision of what the legitimate and appropriate equality and diversity approach should be across the dimensions of voluntarism versus regulation and individualism versus collectivism. So, these two axes were the key emergent lines of differentiation between actors that we interviewed.

From the early days of the arrival of diversity management in the UK, private sector organizations, employer organizations and professional bodies hailed the idea of voluntarism, which can be defined as the proactive take-up of organizational equality and diversity activities driven by business case and bottom line arguments, coupled with a reduction of regulatory pressures on workplaces to carry out legally driven interventions (Greene and Kirton, 2009; Lucio and Perrett, 2009). As Dickens and Hall (2006) argue, notwithstanding the extension in the UK equality legislation in the last decades, there has been a growing emphasis on synchronizing the support for equality and diversity practices with operational and economic efficiency for business.

The axis of collectivism versus individualism is the second dimension through which parameters of the equality and diversity field are shaped. Mainstream diversity approaches allege that the managing diversity perspective has an advantage over equal opportunities, owing to its emphasis on difference and inclusion as opposed to latter’s emphasis on sameness and focus on gender and ethnicity, which led to a backlash by the majority group members in the organizations (Ashkanasy et al., 2002; Thomas, 1990). However, an individualistic approach is criticized because it ignores the historical dynamics of discrimination that frame the diversity problem in a society and the corresponding advantage and disadvantage in employment. Kersten (2000) argues that diversity management overlooks structural issues of discrimination, silences the identity politics and diverts attention to surface level issues. Some scholars further state that the notion of difference based on an individualistic approach is devoid of any substantial meaning (Holvino and Kamp, 2009; Nkomo, 1995). Moreover, Healy, Bradley and Mukherjee (2004) explain that although the managing diversity approach is considered to challenge collectivism and foster a culture of individualism, the reality is more complex than this simplistic depiction. In this article, we unpack this complexity by mapping out the positions of key institutional actors across the field of equality and diversity.

**Methods**

Our analysis in this article is based on 66 in-depth interviews that we conducted as part of a wider scoping study of the equality and diversity context in the UK. The interviews aimed to map out the perspectives of the institutional actors across the equality and diversity field. The interviews were conducted with the representatives of a wide range of organizations that are influential actors in the equality and diversity field. The sample was drawn out of a list of organizations provided by the funding body. The criterion in the selection of respondents was to ensure that key institutional views in the field of equality and diversity were represented in the study. As a result, data were generated on the perspectives of public and private sector organizations, providers of equality and diversity tools and benchmarks, trainers, consultants, as well as trade unions, employer organizations and public sector regulators of equality and diversity (see Table 1 for attributes of participating institutions).
Table 1 Distributive attributes of participating institutions

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<tr>
<th>Sector</th>
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<td>Equality body</td>
<td>General/Race</td>
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<td>Private sector</td>
<td>Recruitment</td>
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<td>Professional body</td>
<td>HR</td>
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<td>Public sector</td>
<td>Local government</td>
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<td>Professional body</td>
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<td>Employer’s organization</td>
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<td>Private sector</td>
<td>Retail</td>
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<td>Public sector</td>
<td>Health</td>
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<td>Equality body</td>
<td>Wales/Gender</td>
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<td>Private sector/Diversity</td>
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<td>Education</td>
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<td>Public sector</td>
<td>Planning</td>
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<td>Public sector</td>
<td>Planning</td>
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<tr>
<td>Professional body</td>
<td>Science and HEI</td>
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<td>Equality body</td>
<td>Sexual orientation</td>
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<td>Private sector</td>
<td>Banking and finance</td>
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<td>Public sector</td>
<td>National Assembly/Wales</td>
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<td>Public sector</td>
<td>Wales/Business development</td>
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<td>Private sector</td>
<td>Banking and finance</td>
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<td>Private sector</td>
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<td>Professional body</td>
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<td>Private sector</td>
<td>Communication</td>
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<td>Equality body</td>
<td>General/Equality and diversity</td>
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<td>Trade union</td>
<td>Communication</td>
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<td>Employer’s organization</td>
<td>Reputation management</td>
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<td>General/Age</td>
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<td>Private sector</td>
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The interviews were conducted face to face when possible, and over the phone in other instances. The interview schedule consisted of questions that explore institutional and organizational views, practices and agendas on workplace equality and diversity. The interviews lasted between 30 minutes to an hour and were transcribed verbatim and coded and recorded using a qualitative analysis software. Our approach to coding and analysing the data corresponds to a point between middle range and grounded approaches. Layder (1998: 15) defines these two approaches as follows:

On the one hand, the middle range approach emphasises the importance of formulating theoretical hypotheses in advance of the research in order to guide the research and to give shape to any subsequent theorizing after the data has been gathered. On the other hand grounded theory emphasise the importance of starting the research with as little pre-formulated theory as possible in order that it may be generated during the research itself.

In line with Layder, we concede that our framework is not purist in nature. Accordingly, our key codes, which we call orienting concepts (Layder, 1998: 101), are both the result of our critical reading of the diversity management literature, which allowed us to identify gaps, and a reflection of the key tensions we observed in the accounts of our research participants. The mainstream managing diversity approaches emphasize that policies

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**Table 1** (Continued)

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<th>Sector</th>
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<td>44 Private sector</td>
<td>Energy</td>
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<td>45 Equality body</td>
<td>General/Race</td>
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<td>46 Public sector</td>
<td>Police services</td>
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<td>47 Public sector</td>
<td>Poverty</td>
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<td>48 Professional body</td>
<td>SMEs</td>
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<td>49 Professional body</td>
<td>HEIs/Diversity</td>
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<td>50 Consultancy</td>
<td>Public sector/Diversity</td>
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<td>51 Public sector</td>
<td>Education</td>
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<td>52 Equality body</td>
<td>General/Race</td>
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<td>53 Consultancy</td>
<td>Public sector/Diversity</td>
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<td>54 Consultancy</td>
<td>Private sector/CSR, Diversity</td>
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<td>Health sector</td>
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<td>56 Trade union</td>
<td>Education</td>
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<td>58 Public sector</td>
<td>Employment relations</td>
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<td>General/management</td>
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<td>Finance</td>
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<td>SMEs/Equality</td>
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<td>Retail</td>
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<td>66 Private sector</td>
<td>Translation</td>
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and programs of diversity management focus on individual differences, and are proactive and internally driven by the bottom line considerations, as opposed to the group-based equal opportunities policies that are externally driven by anti-discrimination legislation (Thomas, 1990). Likewise, the discussions in the critical diversity research circles are centred on the critique of the support for, and implications of, individualistic and voluntaristic approaches to dealing with workplace equality and diversity issues in the managing diversity paradigm (e.g. Dickens, 1999; Kirby and Harter, 2003). The tension between regulation and voluntarism and between collectivism and individualism is not only the main source of the rise of diversity management as an allegedly new paradigm, but also it was significant in shaping the accounts of our interviewees. For that reason we use these four parameters in our analysis as orienting concepts in order to map the relative positioning of different actors in the equality and diversity field in the UK.

We analysed the interview evidence using thematic and open coding and cropping techniques. Thematic coding was conducted by disaggregating the data across four parameters that served as orienting concepts of our analysis. We also used open coding in each parameter to examine the emergent issues in the accounts of our participants, allowing room for their voice and priorities to be presented. The cropping technique was used to highlight and bring forth the strength of the issues that were discussed (e.g. popular accounts versus omissions in the accounts of participants). Accordingly, we located the accounts of our respondents across the dimensions of regulation versus voluntarism and collectivism versus individualism. In placing the equality and diversity actors across the axis of regulation and voluntarism, we examined their approaches to equality and diversity in terms of their responses to legal and business cases. On the other hand, definitions of diversity and difference and the solutions offered to tackle inequality and discrimination were analyzed in order to locate the institutional actors’ position across the collectivism and individualism axis.

Findings and analysis: Situating the key actors in the equality and diversity field

The key debates on diversity management and equal opportunities demonstrate rhetorical differences between the two in terms of their prescription of regulation and collectivism. While the equal opportunities approach has its roots in the industrial relations tradition with its emphasis on regulation (Liff, 1996), diversity management came into being at a period of deregulation in the USA and the UK. Therefore, the context in which diversity management was born is characterized with voluntarism in terms of management of workplace relations, owing to a decline of collectivist movements and increase in instrumental approaches and individualism in the employment relations (Kelly and Dobbin, 1998). In the case of UK, there was a general push for voluntarism, decline of regulatory pressures coupled with a further rise in individualism, and a general decline in collectivist movements (Noon and Ogbonna, 2001). For instance, in their case study of gender equality bargaining in British Gas, Colling and Dickens (1998: 391) argue that as a result of deregulation of employment relations ‘responsibility for promoting equality in the workplace has been privatized’.
However, not all actors in the field have adopted the dominant discourses of the time. Indeed, in the field of equality and diversity there remains discord among significant actors. The key actors in that field are statutory equality bodies, public and private sector organizations, professional bodies and learned organizations, trade unions, employer organizations, consultancies and training organizations. We position these actors across the axes of regulation versus voluntarism and individualism versus collectivism. Figure 1 depicts how each institutional actor is positioned. In the next two sections, we elaborate and explain different positions in the field of equality and diversity, as depicted in Figure 1, scrutinizing the accounts of key actors across four dimensions: individualism, collectivism, regulation and voluntarism.

**Rise of voluntarism**

Our research participants from private sector organizations and interest groups, such as professional bodies and employers’ associations, supported a voluntaristic approach. They claimed that equality and diversity approaches need to highlight the long-term and short-term and tangible and intangible benefits of diversity. One participant from a professional body explained:

Some of the legislation . . . it actually doesn’t really help the groups or the individuals that it set out to help because it can be sort of almost like a dictatorial, if you like. You know, businesses still need to function, still need to deliver on their commitments, and it needs to really dovetail the business needs and actually show that there are benefits. I appreciate that not all the benefits are tangible, but it needs to highlight, you know, what are the long-term intangible benefits. Why should organizations take up this journey, if you like? (Interview 59)

![Figure 1](https://hum.sagepub.com) Position of key institutional actors in the field of equality and diversity across the axes of individualism versus collectivism and regulation versus voluntarism
The argument is that a strong and convincing business case argument should be integrated into diversity management frameworks, not only to gain support and ownership for equality and diversity initiatives from the employers, but also to ensure the effective implementation of these initiatives by engaging organizational actors at different levels across different functions. This business case rhetoric refers both to the costs of not embracing diversity and to the benefits of workforce diversity. According to our respondents, the potential costs associated with not taking measures to promote equality and diversity ranged from high labour turnover, to losing talented employees, to tribunals and the associated bad publicity. The research participants also talked at length about the potential benefits of diversity, such as recruiting and retaining the best talent; improved organizational performance and efficiency; increased productivity and creativity; enhanced trust relationship, satisfaction and commitment within the workforce; improved customer relations and service delivery; and positive corporate image and reputation. A participant from an employer’s organization was particularly enthusiastic about the business case arguments:

**Participant:** As the skills shortages exacerbate, which I’m sure they will, I think to be successful in business you’re going to have to not ignore talents, or treat people badly. I think what needs to be pushed is the business case for this.

**Interviewer:** How do you think employers could be persuaded?

**Participant:** Tell them how much money they will make, that they will be a more successful company by embracing these things. (Interview 8)

However, voluntarism in this field presents an oxymoron, as equality and diversity implies a set of interventions that challenges the status quo and that voluntarism does not offer any such mechanisms for change (Kalev et al., 2006). Therefore, despite its dominance, voluntaristic approach to equality and diversity is highly contestable. Indeed, there is a power struggle in the field alongside the axis of voluntarism versus regulation. The voluntaristic approach was not similarly received by all institutional actors in the UK, where the politics of difference has a long-standing tradition involving state and labour market regulation.

Our interviews suggest that public sector employers, trade unions and equality bodies advocate for regulation of the employee relations in order to promote greater levels of equality and diversity. However, as we explain below, this advocacy is not uniform, as some parties, such as the trade unions are stronger supporters of the regulatory and legislative frameworks, while others, such as the equality bodies, try to position themselves at the centre of the political spectrum. Of all key actors in the field, trade unions are the strongest advocates of anti-discrimination regulation. They advocate for government action to regulate equality and diversity agenda. For instance, one of our respondents from a trade union organization argued that voluntary nature of equality and diversity frameworks is their weak spot:

Unless it’s [equality and diversity policy] legally mandatory, it’s not worth the paper it’s written on. Because we have found that we’re in a situation now where our employer accepts a gender pay-gap because they say they can’t afford it. They can’t afford to do anything about it. (Interview 55)
Another respondent was unconvinced with the unsupportive attitude of the Confederation of British Industry (CBI) regarding compulsion, as she thought that it is unrealistic to expect the employers to engage with a progressive equality and diversity agenda on the basis of business case in the absence of strong legislative controls (Interview 37). Although not as strong as in the case of trade unions, the respondents from public sector organizations also displayed a positive attitude towards progressive legislation in the field of equality and diversity. For example, one of the main differences between public and private sector organizations in their approach was the different motives that underlie their equality and diversity interventions. During our interviews, the emphasis on profit and sales was striking as a justification for diversity management in the private sector where the dominant motivation for equality and diversity programs was supposedly to increase their sales and profit. On the other hand, public sector organizations were largely motivated by the principle of social responsibility. For instance, there was no mention of social issues related to poverty, welfare and integration, such as ‘social cohesion’ or ‘social deprivation’, in the interviews with the private sector respondents, while equality and diversity officers of the public sector organizations did not utter the words of ‘profit’ or ‘growth’. The following account of an equality officer from a public sector organization exemplifies this:

We don’t rely on business case arguments so much, I think, because it’s quite well worn . . . So I think it’s a slightly different approach, from just using the business case. Now, it’s looking more at organizations basically needing to recognize that there are environments that are changing constantly and that have communities that are requesting very diverse services and diverse methods of delivery. And how organizations can respond to that, and also how organizations have responsibility to act ethically within their communities and to address the wider issues of social and economic deprivation. That contributes to whether they can in fact operate successfully particularly within urban communities. (Interview 5)

However, there was evidence of a shift toward voluntarism and business case rhetoric among participants from the public sector. Many respondents from the sector pointed out that ‘value for money’ is becoming increasingly prominent for the public sector. For instance, a respondent from the health sector said that there are competing priorities for NHS trusts, with financial concerns becoming increasingly dominant. Hence, she reasoned that a strong business case argument is essential to persuade the NHS employers to take a proactive stance in the equality and diversity area (Interview 10). Similarly, a respondent from a fire service organization believed that presentation of a well-founded business case argument that will demonstrate that organizations will save money if they are committed to equality and diversity, may create a genuine understanding and commitment by senior management and prevent the use of cost and budget considerations as excuses for not taking action (Interview 34). In the words of another participant from a local government, ‘value for money’ is the new mantra for involving all actors in equality and diversity:

Within a local authority, this one in particular, we are becoming more aware of the importance of providing value for money . . . If it [equality and diversity] could be in some way linked to notions of ‘value for money’ rather than just higher costs, I think that would be helpful. (Interview 27)
In general, equality bodies and institutions maintained that regulation and legislative enforcement is important in terms of motivating the employers to be progressive in the field of equality and diversity. For instance, a respondent from a large institution in the area of gender equality said that equality and diversity can be built into the mindset of businesses of all sizes if there are tangible risks, such as being closed down (Interview 11). One other respondent from an equality body argued:

I think there would have to be an element of compulsion, there would have to be some stronger requirement, either legal or through contract compliance with the public sector, to get them to adopt that approach. Otherwise, I just think you’re just going to get the top third of organizations and no more progress will be made. (Interview 45)

However, there was a sense that there is not sufficient legislative backing, or a popular support for further legislation that is strong enough to encourage employers to undertake policies and programmes that would promote greater levels of equality, diversity and inclusion at the work place. Thus, the general feeling was that a mild strategy, what some respondents called a ‘softly-softly approach’, should be adopted when capitalizing on legislation so that employers will not feel like they are being ‘hit with a stick’. It is argued that in the cases where there is strong legislation, employers can be encouraged to promote equality and diversity by pointing out the risks of not doing so, i.e. tribunals. As for the cases where legislation is weak, it is argued that a positive encouragement strategy is necessary. In general, the rise of voluntarist approaches was evident among the equality and diversity bodies and institutions, who felt that they have to act cautiously in order to engage employers. One of our participants from a statutory equality body explained:

Like a positive tone rather than just sort of coming in and saying, well, you know, we are going to issue you with this order of non-compliance and all that. That doesn’t really bode well with organizations. I think powers of persuasion are much more useful than power of, you know, authoritarian language. (Interview 63)

Adopting strategies of negotiation rather that opposition, participants from equality bodies and institutions frequently mentioned the necessity of giving the employers a good feeling. They argued that equality and diversity efforts should focus on positive aspects of equality and diversity rather than assuming a negative judgemental tone pointing to incompliance. It was evident that in the face of decreasing popularity of legislative sanctions, these bodies and institutions move away from advocating strong regulation towards voluntarism. They believe that as legislative focus may drive away a proactive approach, the emphasis should be on business benefits of equality and diversity. Still, these respondents underlined time and time again that business case arguments should not preclude inclusion of ethical and legal cases. It is pointed out by most of the respondents that the ethical case, in terms of ‘doing the right thing’ and ‘being a best practice employer’, is an important driver for the employers in the UK, as it also indirectly contributes to the bottom line through good publicity, which, in turn, provides the employers with access to a more diverse range of customers. In that sense, equality bodies and institutions try to blend business case with legal case, thus combining regulation and voluntary aspects.
In contrast with the ambivalent position of the equality bodies and institutions, private sector consultancies and training organizations had more pragmatic and opportunistic outlooks in terms of their diversity management approaches. Rather than holding onto and promoting an approach of their own, their perspectives were customer oriented. For example, a respondent from a consultancy that works with small and medium enterprises (SMEs) told us that in order to engage the SMEs they start with business case but end up with legal case, as compliance and procurement are the main priorities for this type of organizations (Interview 61). Similarly, consultancies that provide services to the public sector tend to emphasize regulatory and legislative aspects of workplace equality and diversity, as their customers need to comply with the Equality Duties. On the other hand, consultancies that predominantly work with private sector employers displayed a distaste for regulation of equality and diversity issues, as they believed that it can be intimidating to focus on legal case as their clients are ‘fed up with legislation’. To sum up, despite the multiplicity of perspectives in terms of the regulation versus voluntarism debate, our interviews revealed that the voluntarism approach to equality and diversity is gaining popularity in the UK. Conversely, the domain of advocacy for regulation and progressive legislation is being vacated even by the bodies and institutions that owe their foundations to the anti-discrimination legislation.

Rise of individualism

In our interviews, we observed a significant divide between private sector organizations, professional bodies, and employers’ organizations on the one hand, and trade unions, public sector organizations and equality bodies on the other hand, across the collectivism-individualism spectrum. The private sector employers and interest groups position themselves at the individualistic end of the spectrum. Distancing themselves from the identity politics, they call for recognition of individual differences at the expense of acknowledging the significant role of structural categories of difference in shaping workplace relations. A respondent from a private sector organization described the company’s understanding of diversity as follows:

I think it stands out as everybody is welcome at XXX. Instead of treating everybody the same it’s more about celebrating the differences and to make sure that we are in business as a whole tuned into those differences and how to use that to everybody’s advantage from employees’ point of view, customers’ point of view. (Interview 64)

Although our interviews revealed that in the equality and diversity field individualism was far more popular than collectivist concerns, equality bodies, trade unions and public sector organizations distanced themselves from individualized definition of diversity and based their equality and diversity approach on traditional categories of disadvantage. When we asked them how they define diversity in their organizations, respondents from the public sector confined their definition to the categories of structural inequality covered by the anti-discrimination legislation in the UK:
It is about the service users and employees, disability, gender, race and age, and obviously sexual orientation, religion, everything. As more legislation came on line we amend it. (Interview 13)

Among these, trade unions were the strongest supporters of collectivistic action. On the other hand, private sector organizations, professional bodies, and employer organizations tend to avoid any concerns with group- and disadvantage-based identity politics and conflict. An interesting example was about the conception of trade unions’ role in design and implementation of diversity policies and programmes. Private sector employers emphasized direct employee consultation rather than ‘needing trade unions’. The idea of direct consultation and the minor mention of the trade unions in the accounts of these respondents reveal that such a diversity approach is associated with the diminished role of the trade unions. Thus, recent diversity approaches adopt the HRM perspective to labour relations, rather than engaging in traditional industrial relations (Liff, 1996). Consequently, an individual-based definition of difference was very popular among private sector actors. Within that framework, sticking to traditional categories of disadvantage was deemed old-fashioned, while a larger than life conception of difference was cherished. The diversity manager of a private sector organization proudly explained the company’s shift of emphasis from collective to individual differences as follows:

Initially our work was [sic] used to be about gender, race and disability. But over time we moved a lot more to educating managers around non-visible differences. You know diversity in its truest sense that everybody is different. Even a group of white men is different. And just helping line managers manage teams better and clearly we still put a focus on gender differences or racial differences. But it’s beyond that a lot more now and we’ve broken away from the traditional equal opportunities groups to recognise that everybody is different. (Interview 18)

Although supporters of individualistic conceptions of diversity advocate that individual differences should be recognized, there is little other than general stereotypes about what constitutes a real and what would be an imagined difference. By identifying and valuing a form of individual difference, the organization goes to affirm and support this difference. This act alone sets an individualistic conception of difference apart from the transformational agenda that ultimately aims for organizations to become more egalitarian. What is required is to have an approach to diversity that does not only state what kind of difference is valued, but how it is valued and in what ways does the organization commit to transforming social and economic inequalities that reinforce imagined differences, which keep women, minority ethnic groups, disabled workers and sexual orientation minorities firmly in their place.

Discussion

Our findings demonstrate that there is a variety of standpoints in the field of equality and diversity across the dimensions of regulation – voluntarism and collectivism – individualism. For instance, our interview data illustrate that while some institutional actors embraced voluntarism as it complements the current neo-liberal climate, others retain an interest on the effectiveness of regulation as a means to manage employment relations. In
that sense, the key divide is between the private sector organizations, professional bodies and employers’ organizations that are located at the intersection of voluntarism and individualism and trade unions, public sector organizations and equality bodies that are located at the intersection of regulation and collectivism. However, as we pointed out at the beginning of this article, social fields are contested spaces characterized by their occupants’ struggle for domination.

What is important to consider here is that individual and institutional actors that occupy a particular field have unequal access to, and ownership of, power and resources, which constitutes a significant imbalance in the struggle for domination and legitimacy. Thus, not all actors in the equality and diversity field had similar levels of power and influence to determine the direction of change in the framing of equality and diversity. Disparate power and influence that actors have in the field of equality and diversity mean that stronger actors with neo-liberal agendas were able to twist the arm of the weaker actors who subscribed to more substantive approaches, and had greater legitimacy of worldmaking, to use Bourdieu’s phrase. The particular example of this is the evacuation of the domain at the intersection of regulation and collectivism. Our findings suggest that the workplace equality debate is reinvented along neo-liberal lines of individualism and voluntarism by the private sector in the UK. The main excuse that the private sector employers and interest groups offer for embracing voluntarism in diversity management was that a legally driven approach to equality did not deliver positive outcomes and placed significant administrative burdens on organizations. However, the neo-liberal agenda itself is nuanced and neo-liberalism as a contemporary trend materializes in different shapes and degrees across the globe (see Hall and Soskice, 2001 for an overview of the varieties of capitalism debate) and within the national context depending on the ideological choices of the governing political party. For instance, in the case of Britain, which is generally located at the free market economy end of the spectrum (Hall and Soskice, 2001), Thatcherite and Blairite variants of neo-liberalism in terms of intervention into employment relations have not been identical. According to Hall (2003: 22), the neo-liberalism of New Labour can be identified as a ‘social-democratic variant of neo-liberalism’. Despite the nuances in their neo-liberal agendas, equality and diversity interventions of both Conservative and New Labour governments were characterized by light touch regulation rather than strong enforcement (Dickens, 2004).

The influence of individualist and business case driven diversity management perspectives is also felt in the collectivistic/regulatory quadrant of our analyses with the decreasing popularity of collectivist concerns. There is a trend towards adoption of diversity management, by employment relations actors, such as trade unions and public sector organizations, which have retained a critical distance to this perspective before. In congruence with the spirit of third way politics (Howell, 2004), instrumental logics of performance and profits creep into bastions of collectivism and progressive regulation. One poignant example of this is the series of collaborative activities in the field of equality and diversity between the CBI and Trade Union Congress. These traditional opponents have jointly produced a report called ‘Talent not Tokenism’(CBI, 2008), which indicates that a neo-liberal turn is gaining force as the strong arm of the corporate world is twisting that of the workers’ collective voice, which has traditionally used collectivism and regulation as its main tools for counterbalancing employers’ interests. One note of
caution here on the tendencies towards individualism among trade unions is that this does not necessarily apply to the general union strategies in other areas, but to the area of equality and diversity. Trade unions have multiple agendas and, as indicated by several scholars, equality and diversity issues may not be always at the forefront, partially owing to the traditional white male bias (Dickens, 1997; Kirton and Greene, 2002). Therefore, the unions may tend to use their negotiation power for traditional issues such as protecting jobs and pensions instead of mobilizing their collectivistic resources for the equality and diversity issues.

The findings we presented in this article need to be read within the wider socio-political context because the field of equality and diversity, like any other field, is semi-autonomous, which means that it is embedded in social and political structures of the wider society and contingent upon historical forces. Using the example of the USA, Acker (2006) states that in recent decades there has been a tendency towards increasing invisibility and legitimacy of inequality regimes. The conceptualization that we offered in this article is strongly connected to the two key dimensions, i.e. visibility and legitimacy, in Acker’s framing of inequality regimes. The axis of collectivism versus individualism relates to the visibility of inequalities, because imposing a vision of equality and diversity as a matter for individuals reduces the visibility of structural- and group-based nature of inequality and difference. On the other hand, voluntarism versus regulation axis is a reflection of the legitimacy of inequalities, because the more inequality is perceived as illegitimate and unacceptable, the stronger will be the regulation in this field.

Acker (2006) explains the regressive trend of raising legitimacy and invisibility of inequalities with the global and national political and economic landscape of increasing deregulation and de-politicization. Similarly, in the last three decades, trade union power is decreasing in the UK (Heery, 2006) and there are efforts to free up commercial enterprises from regulatory pressures (Howell, 2004). Therefore, private sector employers enjoyed better relationships with the consecutive Conservative and Labour governments. Resultantly, they had stronger voices, channels and platforms of political and economic influence. Diversity management as a discourse and workplace practice took root in such a political economic context. Furthermore, the state poses a key influence in shaping the position and power of the actors in any particular field (Emirbayer and Johnson, 2008). Bourdieu (1998: 33) explains the role of the state on different fields as follows:

Because it concentrates an ensemble of material and symbolic resources, the state is in a position to regulate the functioning of different fields, whether through financial intervention (such as public support of investment in the economic field, or in the cultural field, support for one kind of education or the other) or through juridical intervention (such as the different regulations concerning organizations or the behaviour of individual agents).

For the case of the institutional equality and diversity actors, the state plays a role through provision of financial resources as well as legislation and enforcement of regulation. This double scope of the state’s role, in turn, is an important determinant of the symbolic power and resources available to different actors. For example, the pressures on the public sector organizations by the state to provide ‘value for money’ as a result of the post-1979 Conservative governments’ new public management agenda and the
post-1997 New Labour governments’ modernization project push these organizations towards adopting business case discourses when they frame their equality and diversity policies and choose between competing priorities when they make decisions on where to devote their limited resources (Bach, 2002; Cunningham et al., 2006). Similarly, the power and resources of the equality bodies are affected by how much enforcement power they are given by the state, as well as the amount of financial and human resources at their disposal (see Dickens, 2006). Regulatory and legislative provision by the state is a key for these institutions in terms of their ability to improve the equality and diversity practice in both public and private sector organizations. Exerting an influence on the decisions and actions of the state, in turn, is a key site of symbolic struggle for the private sector that traditionally resists regulation and lobbies for reducing any existing regulatory pressures. Consequently, the state is a meta-actor that shapes the power balances, trends, change and position takings in the equality and diversity field. Commenting on industrial relations research, Howell (2005) makes a similar call for paying greater attention to the role of state in shaping the institutional context of employment relations. However, despite being a meta-actor with key influence on the field of equality and diversity, it should be noted that the state is not an all-empowering actor that is located outside of (and free from) the relations and struggles for power and legitimacy (Ludlam et al., 2003). Instead, the state policy reacts to the pressures of interest groups and proactively pushes specific agendas forward. For instance, Ludlam and Taylor (2003) suggest that continuation of the Conservative-initiated proactive state policies to deregulate industrial relations and markets under New Labour has been partially a response to the changing composition of the British electorate (see also Hamann and Kelly, 2003). Therefore, explorations of the role and capabilities of the state in promoting equality and diversity need to be situated and contextual, accounting for the power of the state as the meta-actor, while recognizing the constraints over the state’s action owing to the ways it responds to the demands of multiple actors with conflicting agendas.

**Conclusion**

Using the Bourdieuan concept of the field, which is identified as a relational social space generated through struggles for symbolic domination between competing actors, this article offered insights into the ways in which the equality and diversity field is constructed through struggles between multiple institutional actors for imposing their vision of equality and diversity across the axes of individualism versus collectivism and voluntarism versus regulation, which are the key frontiers of differentiation in this field. In construction of the field of equality and diversity, it is important to note differences across institutional actors. Although the standpoint of each institutional actor in the field is relatively rigid, the multiplicity of standpoints serves as a destabilizing context in which multiple perspectives are subjected to constant contestation. For example, the statutory equality bodies have a different approach to diversity when compared with organizations in public and private sectors, as well as the CBI, other professional bodies or trade unions. While private sector organizations and employers’ unions hastily embrace and advocate the version of diversity approach that is based on voluntarism and individualism as a new method for increasing competitiveness and work performance, this has received much
scepticism from trade unionists, and cautious reception from the equality bodies and public sector employers regarding the adequacy of the approach in addressing their traditional concerns over social and workplace inequalities. Indeed, the discussions that ensued suggest that the business case arguments of diversity management have been viewed as a tool of the neo-liberal ideology that has sought to individualize, de-collectivize and de-unionize workforces (Lorbiecki and Jack, 2000).

Our research with the key actors in the equality and diversity field revealed the presence of a neo-liberal turn away from regulation- and collectivism-oriented approaches towards voluntarism and individualism. Voluntaristic and individualistic discourses are increasingly being more widely adopted and dominate the public debates on workplace equality and diversity. Nevertheless, as Bourdieu argues, ‘any field presents itself as structure of probabilities of rewards, gains, profits or sanctions with a degree of indeterminacy’ (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992: 18). For that reason, we argue that it is important to recognize that the equality and diversity field is not static, and involves structural and agentic dimensions. The structural forces relate to the distribution of power and resources between actors, while agentic forces involve the differentiated interests, aspirations and improvisations of the actors in that field.

The findings of our research have important policy implications. Neo-liberal ideas of voluntarism and individualism engender the risk of legitimizing hegemony and overlooking ‘inequality regimes’ (Acker, 2006). As diversity management increasingly becomes a settled approach, an ‘orthodoxy’ (Bourdieu, 1984) based on these neo-liberal ideas is being established. However, the changes in the field of equality and diversity are not uniform, or uni-directional, but are dynamically generated through power struggles and progress may follow periods of inertia. The extent to which struggles between different actors over legitimacy may challenge the current orthodoxy in this field will shape the inclusion and equality at the UK workplaces. As we have discussed, in the field of equality and diversity, the state policy and action has a crucial influence over shaping the distribution of symbolic power and resources between different actors. Therefore, the state has an important role to play in widening the heterodoxic space (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992), which recognizes the importance of regulatory measures and identity politics for redressing historically rooted patterns of difference and disadvantage.

Our data suggested that there is a move away from regulation in the field of equality and diversity in the UK context. Conversely, we recently witnessed introduction of new equality legislation (i.e. the Single Equality Act). However, the implementation of such key legislation and its success in being translated into practice depends most of the time on secondary legislation, which specifies the grounds of enforcement (Conley and Page, 2010; Dickens, 2007). This implies that there are different levels of regulation that impose distinct boundaries for voluntarist trends. Similarly, the individualism and collectivism dimension is complicated by the fact that the notion of individualism itself is partially an oxymoron because, as Bourdieu (2005) puts it, the individual is always collective, thus an idea of individualism as totally grounded on individuals is misleading.

In this article we used these concepts generically as ideal types, and defined them as they are discussed in the equality and diversity literature. Equality and diversity research would benefit from future studies that explore the complexities of the framework across the axes of regulation versus voluntarism and collectivism versus individualism.
Furthermore, this article offered a general overview of the positions of key actors in the equality and diversity field. For that reason, our attention was on the general trends within the subset of different actors. However, not all actors representing the same interest group will have identical positions and visions of equality and diversity. For instance, it is highly likely that there are some private sector organizations who may position themselves differently across the axes of regulation versus voluntarism and collectivism versus individualism (see Frieden, 1988 on sectoral divides of business interest). Similarly, trade unions may have divided loyalties and competing agendas on which segments of the labour force they opt to represent. This is exemplified by instances of unions campaigning in order to limit migration (Fitzgerald and Hardy, 2010; Wrench, 2004), contributing to the gendering processes, such as undervaluing of skills involved in female-dominated jobs (Wajcman, 2000) and displaying ‘political and cultural forgetfulness’ towards disabled employees (Humphrey, 1998: 588). In other words, the competition and struggle may take place not only between the different actors, but also between the agents, who belong to the same interest group. Thus, future research may be conducted to investigate the disparities, competition and struggle between the organizational and individual agents within each grouping of key institutional actors. Finally, empirical studies that explore the equality and diversity field in different national contexts, as well as cross-cultural studies, will open up new avenues for equality and diversity research.

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References


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