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Seeing Through Eyes of the Beholders: Glimpses of Diversity, Equity and

Inclusion (DEI) Practice within Organizations

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ABSTRACT

Diversity is a well-known concept. It is also contextual. In view of the recent developments, such as the #Metoo movement and the worsening racial relations (Pew Research, 2020) in the United States, it is important to take stock of diversity practice within organizations. Since diversity is written in the daily interactions of diversity practitioners (Smith, 2017), the study focuses on experiences of their experiences. Using interviews with 26 diversity practitioners from a diverse sample of organizations, we found that organizations have continued to recycle the old diversity management approaches, such as *Fairness* and *Access*. However, although a majority of diversity practitioners entered the profession rather serendipitously, they bring passion and 'purpose' to their work. As such, they are faced with paradoxes (Smith & Lewis, 2011), in terms of balancing their personal values and that of the organization (oftentimes driven by profits), advocating for personal agency while feeling constrained by organizational structures, and implementing piecemeal identity-blind practices while remaining identity-conscious. We conclude diversity management is complex, and messy. It is important for leaders to broaden their sight (beyond profit maximization and compliance- Aguinis, 2019) in order to create inclusive workplaces.

Keywords:

Diversity policies and practices, inclusion, qualitative research methods

Rapid pace of globalization, rising levels of inequalities, and global mobility have brought diversity debate to the forefront (Kelly, & Smith, 2014; Podsiadlowski et. al., 2013; Shore, Cleveland and Sanchez, 2018). There is a wide agreement that organizations need to actively manage diversity to reap benefits of creativity, innovation, and productivity (Gompers, & Kovvali, 2018; Jang, 2018; Lorenzo, & Reeves, 2018). Diversity is a well-known concept. It is also contextual and shaped by the political, cultural, and organizational environments within which we operate (Unzueta, Knowles, & Ho, 2018). Nkomo & Hoobler (2014), in their review of diversity ideologies in the United States, present four distinct eras of diversity practice, including the White supremacy and the sanctioned exclusion of racio-ethnic minorities' before the 1960s, the equal opportunity–Civil Rights of the 1960s, the diversity management and multiculturalism of the 1980s and 1990s, and contemporary inclusion/ post-race era. As we have progressed through these eras, our understanding of diversity has also evolved from focusing on differences to emphasizing identity (de Anca & Aragon, 2018; Villesche, Muhr & Holck, 2018), intersectionality (Kelly, & Smith, 2014; Mercer, Paludi, Mills, & Mills, 2015), and identifying inclusive processes (Mor Barak, 2015).

Since Nkomo & Hoobler (2014) published their work, much has changed in the United States. A CBS poll found 6 in every 10 Americans believe that race relations are generally bad (Salvanto, De Pinto, Backus, & Khanna, 2019). This compares to an earlier poll (from 2009), in which 66% Americans expressed that race relations were good (Fingerhut, 2019). Social statistics and research also indicate that structural and institutional racism continues to persist within the United States amidst un-resolved racial tensions. Goldberg (2015), who is skeptical of the idea of post-raciality, argues that racial expression has in fact become more virile in recent years. At the same time, we have also witnessed the rise of #Metoo movement. Some studies

claim that male employees are self-policing (out of fear), and avoiding hiring female workers in the aftermath of the #Metoo movement (Brantley and Tompkins, 2020)- thus contributing to sexual discrimination. These are two examples of how the context has continued to evolve over the past few years to impact diversity efforts within organizations.

Within this charged environment, it is important to take stock of the diversity debate and practice within organizations. The key to managing diversity effectively is inclusion (Brown, 2018; Mor Barak, 2015). While in recent years, diversity and inclusion have become synonymous, they are distinct concepts. Scholars have argued that diversity is a pre-cursor to inclusion, and without inclusion (i.e. creating an environment where people can be who they are, and that values their unique talents and perspectives), diversity can become problematic (Brown, 2018; Mor Barak, 2015; Nishii, & Rich 2014). Human experience is essential to the study of diversity, and diversity practice is in the daily interactions of diversity practitioners (Smith, 2017). Diversity practitioners, as active agents and advocates of diversity, are central to this assessment. Since diversity is also a malleable concept that we approach through our personal lens (Unzueta, Knowles, & Ho, 2012), we ask: *What are the experiences of diversity practitioners in today's organizations*? Being beholders of diversity, their narratives and accounts are valuable to understanding the current state of diversity (Unzueta, & Binning, 2012).

The paper is laid in five sections. We begin with a review of the literature, focusing on the definitions of diversity, distinction between diversity, equity and inclusion, the role of identity and intersectionality in diversity discussion and the approaches used by organizations. Next, we discuss the research methodology, study sample and participant profile. Results, in terms of key themes, as well discussion of important findings follow. We conclude with implications for research.

LIETRATURE REVIEW

Diversity is arguably one of the most recognized and well-accepted organizational phenomenon. Scholars and practitioners no longer contest and/or question its importance (Benchop, Holgersson, Van den Brink, & Wahl, 2015). As a result, diversity studies, that initially focused on delineating benefits of diversity, have also advanced in their undertaking (for example, Janssens, & Steyaert, 2019). Diversity research and practice, itself, has expanded its domain to encompass a variety of other concepts, such as intersectionality, equity, identity and inclusion. Diversity, as the distributional and compositional attributes (such as age, gender, ethnicity), is the starting point for any discussion. It is also the simplest to deal with, in terms of primarily quantifiable goals and metrics. However, as one starts to incorporate inclusion, equity, identity, and intersectionality in the discussion, complexity increases. In this section, we present review of what diversity refers to, the different approaches to diversity management, as well as a discussion of inclusion, equity, identity, and intersectionality to offer a more complex (and messier) understanding of diversity (Gagnon, & Cornelius, 2002; Janssens, & Steyaert, 2019).

What is diversity

A single definition of diversity doesn't exist (de Anca & Aragon, 2018; Herring, 2009). For some, diversity is the degree to which an organization is heterogenous with respect to personal and functional attributes (Stevens, Plaut, & Sanchez-Burk, 2008). Others refer to the perceived differences between individuals- where the self considers the other to be different, based on a perception of their characteristics (Roberge, & Dicke, 2010). Scholars have used different labels to classify distinct types of diversity. De Anca and Aragon (2018) refer to cognitive (how we think, make decisions and problem solve), experiential (hobbies, abilities etc.) and demographic (to include age and gender) aspects of diversity. Levi (2017) refers to the

surface- level and deep-level aspects of diversity; where surface level diversity is readily detectable and typically incudes age, gender, ethnicity, functional background and tenure in the organization. There is no doubt that surface level diversity is a reality for organizations and important for the society. But it is also worth mentioning that human behavior is complex; and individuals may categorize themselves in differ ways (Ghorashi, & Sabelis, 2014). Hence there are also intra-group differences based upon abilities, personality, attitudes and values. These characteristics are considered deep-level aspects of diversity. Deep level diversity is attitudinal and psychological in nature. Research has indicted that as teams and groups continue to interact with each other, surface level diversity becomes less important while deep-level diversity gains more prominence (Podsiadlowski et. al., 2013). From this perspective, diversity becomes an all-inclusive term that incorporates many classifications and differences. While an expansion of the term has helped broaden scope of diversity, scholars have argued that this expansion has hurt minority groups and also led to their further marginalization (Geletkanycz, Clark, & Gabaldon, 2018).

For many people, diversity still evokes emotional response, sometimes in terms of politically charged affirmative action and 'quotas' (Herring, 2009). Such a response highlights the historical emphasis on race and gender (Geletkanycz, Clark, & Gabaldon, 2018; Herring 2009). Additionally, these emotions bring social, legal and political aspects of diversity to light. We conclude diversity is not just an organizational issue; it is also a political, historical, legal and social issue in United States.

Incorporating equity & inclusion

Scholars have argued that in diversity practice, inclusion is the key. Without inclusion, diversity becomes problematic (Brown, 2018; Mor Barak, 2015; Nishii, & Rich 2014). Diversity can be mandated, but inclusion is voluntary (Winters, 2014). Brown (2018) defines inclusion in terms of creating an environment - where people can be who they are, that values their unique talents and perspectives, and makes them want to stay. In order to establish inclusion as a construct, Shore et. al. (2011) have proposed to be composed of two major elements, including uniqueness and belongingness. Several studies have indicated that for employees to feel included (therefore satisfied and productive), they have to perceive they are valuable members of the teams whose belonging and unique needs are satisfied (Chung et. al, 2016; Mor Barak, 2015). Further, Mor-Barak (2015) argues that inclusion ensures employees their unique contribution to the organization is appreciated and their full participation is encouraged. Mor Barak and Daya (2014, pp. 393–394) indicate,

> "the inclusive workplace is based on a pluralistic value frame that respects all cultural perspectives represented among its employees."

Shore, Cleveland and Sanchez (2018) argue that, inclusion involves equal opportunity for marginalized groups, provides opportunities for non-marginalized groups, and supports all employees. This understanding also establishes the importance of equity in diversity. Scholars have argued that it is because of persistent inequities that we need diversity initiatives in the first place (Dorling, 2015); and without addressing the root causes of inequity, we cannot make any progress (Acker, 2006) . Equity is defined as the equal, fair and just treatment of all individuals. Within the diversity debate, equity is needed to overcome/ address the systematic disparities in power and control over goals, resources and outcomes, that impact an individual's capability, well-being and motivation (Bapuji, 2015; Sen, 1997).

As described above, the distinction between diversity, equity and inclusion is clearly established in the literature. There is also evidence that it is inclusion that makes diversity work-diversity is only a pre-cursor to inclusion (Brown, 2018; Mor Barak, 2015); inequity the root cause and equity ensures fair and just treatment. These three terms go hand in hand. Consequently, diversity, equity and inclusion terms are oftentimes used co-jointly as DE&I within organizations. For the purpose of this paper, we also use DE&I as an acronym, while fully appreciating the distinction among these terms.

Into broader and messier realms- identity and intersectionality

Villesche, Muhr & Holck (2018) argue that while diversity is about differences and identity is about sameness- that appears exact opposite. However, individual differences do matter for a person's identity. Since individual categories of differences aren't neutral, they affect one's identity. Expressed as a healthy tension, Villesche, Muhr & Holck (2018) further contend, "diversity and identity are experienced simultaneously and instantaneously" (p. 3). Similar tension is also apparent in our conceptualization of inclusion, as mentioned previously, emphasizing both uniqueness (difference) and the belongingness (sameness and identity) simultaneously. Since identity is oftentimes conceptualized as 'self in relation to the other', being different in relation to the other and/or similar to the other (Ghorashi, & Sabelis, 2013), it complements discussion of diversity in connection of self with the 'other'.

On a more practical level, de Anca and Aragon (2018) tie demographic diversity to *identities of origin*, experiential diversity to *identities of growth*, and cognitive diversity to *identities of aspiration*. Roberts and Cha (2016) argue that minority experience is daunting within organizations, because of entrenched systems of organizing. They present identity as a resource through which racio-ethnic minorities can navigate their challenging experiences in the

workplace. Kelly and Smith (2014) discards traditional models of diversity and claims younger individuals are rejecting being boxed in neatly organized diversity categories. Employees today want to be recognized for who they are- in terms of their identity and lived experiences. Since all of us inherently carry more than one identity (for example, someone could be a cis-female, an academic and mother at the same time), our identities overlap and present themselves in unique ways. From this perspective, intersectionality also emerges as an important concept in diversity discussion.

Identity and intersectionality add dimensionality as well as dynamism to diversity discussion. Such a perspective highlights the importance of lived experiences, hence helps us move way from examining people as rational and mathematical objects. Yet at the same time, these concepts also complexify the concept of diversity; making it even messier (Gagnon, & Cornelius, 2002; Jenssen, & Steyaert, 2019). Therefore, it is important to engage with diversity through identity and intersectionality to honor the lived experiences of individuals, to create more inclusive workplaces (Kelly & Smith, 2014; Villesche, Muhr, & Holck, 2018), and capture essence of diversity.

Diversity management approaches

Research has highlighted a variety of approaches to managing diversity within organizations. Ely and Thomas (1996) presented three main approaches namely, 1) *Discrimination and Fairness*, 2) *Access and Legitimacy*, and 3) *Learning and Effectiveness*. The first paradigm, *Discrimination and Fairness*, targets equal opportunity, fair treatment as well as compliance with EEO and other federal mandates. Ely and Thomas (1996) argued it was the most dominant prevailing paradigm within organizations in the 1990s. This approach has been referred to as being assimilation-focused and color (and gender) blind. The *Access and*

Opportunity paradigm, on other hand, accepts and celebrates differences amongst individuals. It is embedded in market-based motivation and focuses on making a business case for diversity by matching employees (and their culture) to the consumers organizations serve. For example, Hispanic employees serving Hispanic customers. By doing so, this paradigm also pigeonholes employees and over-emphasizes differentiation. Finally, *Learning and Effectiveness* paradigm promotes integration, and treats everyone the same with differences (not despite them).

Since Ely and Thomas' (1996) work, Podsialowski, Otten and van der Zee (2009) have reexamined diversity management approaches and re-arranged their model in 5 diversity approaches. These include, 1) *Reinforcing Homogeneity*, 2) *Colorblind*, 3) *Fairness*, 4) *Access* and 5) *Integration and Learning*. According to their explanation, organizations that *reinforce homogeneity*, in essence, reject and avoid diversity. *Colorblind* refers to equal and fair treatment without acknowledging cultural differences. *Fairness* emphasizes equal treatment and avoiding discriminatory practices. The *Access* approach sees diversity as a business strategy. The latter 3 approaches correspond with Ely and Thomas' *Access and Legitimacy* paradigm. Finally, *Integration and Learning* is a broader approach that aims to create a learning and more inclusive environment to benefit diverse workforce. In essence, an organization that employs this approach acknowledges uniqueness of individuals. It is a more inclusive.

Previously, we argued that diversity is a socio-political and legal issue. It is, hence, important to also discuss Nkomo & Hoobler's (2014) categorization of diversity ideologies within United States, that take legal and political developments into account. They make a case for examining history (as part of the context) in understanding diversity ideologies, or the societal beliefs and attitudes regarding non-dominant groups. Their analysis reviews major external pressures (such as industrialization, World War II, Plessey vs Ferguson Supreme Court

case, civil rights, multiculturalism etc.) that have shaped diversity ideologies in 20th and 21st century. They present four distinct eras of diversity practice and research, including, 1) *the White supremacy* and the sanctioned *exclusion* of racio-ethnic minorities' before the 1960s, as per the Jim Crow laws 2) *the equal opportunity*–Civil Rights of the 1960s, which facilitated US government and political leaders to dismantle the system of inequality of racio-ethnic minorities 3) *the diversity management* and *multiculturalism* of the 1980s and 1990s, which encouraged appreciation of diverse cultures, and 4) contemporary *inclusion/ post-race era*. There is no doubt that inclusion is critical to managing diversity (Brown, 2018; Mor Barak, 2015), however, we are skeptical of Nkomo & Hoobler's (2014) categorization to today's 'post-race" era. We wonder, "are we all post-racial yet" (Goldberg, 2015). As Nkomo and Hoobler (2014) have themselves noted, many scholars reject the notion of a 'post-race' contemporary reality. It is still the case that our world insists on racial choices and preferences (Goldberg, 2015). Various surveys also indicate that equality hasn't been achieved. Women still earn 76 cents to every dollar a man earns, African Americans own less than 2% of the wealth, and are under-represented on the top and over-represented at the bottom of organizations (Inequality.org, 2020).

Despite aforementioned criticism, Nkomo and Hoobler's (2014) work makes an important contribution. It presents diversity as a dynamic and contextual concept, that is constantly shaped by external events. The past few years, since their work was published, have been unexpected but also critical in American history. Pew Research (2020) indicates most Americans think it is now more common for people to express racist remarks, 4 in 10 Americans believe racism has become more acceptable, and most blacks believe someone has acted suspicious of them or acted as if they weren't smart. At the same time, post #Metoo era, studies indicate that males are self-policing and avoiding hiring female workers. In view of these

developments, that indicate a possible deterioration of race and gender relations, the present study takes stock of DE&I efforts within organizations. Practitioners' narratives are likely to offer rich insights into the current practices, as well conditions within which diversity operates (Shiller, 2019).

RESEARCH METHODS

A qualitative approach was used for this study. Corbin and Strauss (2008) define qualitative analysis as a "process of examining and interpreting data in order to elicit meaning, gain understanding, and develop empirical knowledge" (p. 1). In qualitative research, however, the principal focus is to "to uncover and interpret these meanings" (Merriam, 2009, p. 24).

Sample

Scholarly opinion varies on the number of participants needed for qualitative studies, ranging from 6 to more than 20 (Guest, Bunce, & Johnson, 2006). We interviewed 26 participants. Diversity of representation is important in qualitative research, as samples are oftentimes quite small. Diversity for a sample of DE&I practitioners with a focus on their experiences and organizational approaches to DE&I required that we capture a sample in terms of different age groups, varied career length and work experiences, as well as practitioners working across different sectors. Our criterion for sampling included that each participant needed to be working actively (at time of the interview) in DE&I space within an organization; and to have a minimum of 2 years of work experience.

Data collection

We used convenience sampling to collect the data. We asked peers, students, and friends to identify participants who matched the broad sampling criteria (i.e. a minimum of 2 years of experience, and diversity in terms of work experiences and organizations). A total of 30 participants were identified; of which 26 participated in the study. Out of 26 participants, 21 were cis-females, 2 were non-binary and 3 were cis-males; 10 were Caucasian white, 14 were African Americans, and 2 were Asian Americans. Participants ranged in age from early 30s to mid 60s. They had a minimum of 5 years of work experience in DE&I space (that allowed them to talk about/ reflect on DE&I within organizations). They represented a variety of organizations: 9 worked in education and the non-profit sectors; 9 in the private sector (including 3 in multinational companies); 3 in the public sector, and 5 in consulting. All of the participants were based in the US, from the East Coast to the West Coast. A diverse sample allowed us to capture DE&I approaches used by a variety of organizations in the US. Refer to Table 1 for a profile of the study participants.

Insert Table 1 about here

Semi-structured interviews were the source of information for this study. Interviews were conducted face to face and also over phone, Skype, or WebEx if there was geographical distance between the participants and researcher(s). The interviews focused on DE&I practitioners' experiences, in terms of the initiatives they pursue, approaches they employ, roles they are assigned, commitment they receive, challenges they face, perspectives they share, and meanings they ascribe to DE&I.. Each interview lasted between 45 and 90 minutes and was recorded using a digital recorder.

DATA ANALYSIS AND RESULTS

Data Analysis

Our data analysis process was manual. It moved from preparation and organization of data to the coding process, which produced themes (discussed below) and identification of results (Creswell, 1998). We began the data analysis process by reading and transcribing each interview. Data analysis continued with the identification of segments of data that were potentially responsive to the research questions (Merriam, 2009). Following the identification of segments of data, we utilized open coding and segments of data were named as the researcher read and re-read transcripts (Merriam, 2009). In vivo codes, or exact words used by participants, were also used during this process (Creswell, 1998). All codes, and subsequent themes, were recorded and as new codes or themes emerged we reviewed previous transcripts to ensure all themes were captured (Dyke, & Murphy, 2006). This process resulted in over 150 initial codes and potential themes. Continuous fracturing and rearranging the data, based upon emic as well as etic codes, that many scholars believe is necessary for building an understanding (Agar, 2011; Yin, 2010), resulted in 92 codes (first order themes); from which 13 sub-themes (second order themes) and eventually three themes (overarching themes) emerged (please refer to Table 2). This data analysis process allowed us to construct meaning of participants' experiences, drawn from their own words and descriptions (Creswell, 1998).

Insert Table 2 about here

Results

The three overarching themes that illustrate how participants described their experiences with DE&I profession and practice included contextual and evolving realities of DE&I, expressed in terms of: 1) *People they are* (four sub themes- their identity, work/roles they were engaged in, their competencies, and their guiding values), 2) *Pressures they face* (that both mobilize and paralyze DE&I practice- four sub-themes- external pressures, paradoxes they manage, their daily struggles and the taxing impact of DE&I as a profession), 3) *Organizational systems and practices they design and/or encounter* (five sub-themes, including lack of leadership commitment, lack of supportive cultures, lack of shared understanding, types of organizations (as per stages of DE&I adoption), and the disconnect between espoused ideologies and the approaches used). Refer to Table 2 for a more detailed review of these themes. While we have identified these broad themes and sub-themes under separate categories, based upon our in-depth review and understanding of the literature, we do realize overlaps between them. No qualitative research promises neat, stand-alone categories (Saldana, 2016).

Theme 1- people they are. This theme included four sub themes- practitioners' identity, work/roles they were engaged in, their competencies, and their guiding values.

Participants described DE&I practice within their organizations in terms of their personal *identity* (who they were, what they brought to the table, their backgrounds and lived experiences). Oftentimes, organizations initially hired these DE&I practitioners without a clear understanding of what needed to be done, either as a reaction to an internal jolt (such as a racially charged incident at work), an attempt at legal compliance and/or market pressures/ trends. A majority of these practitioners approached DE&I through their values and personal philosophy, which was shaped by their personal identity and backgrounds. Heidi, who self-identified as queer, stated that it was their lived experiences that helped them become an

effective advocate for the marginalized groups. Mona (who self-identified as a queer woman of color) talked about their identity impacting their interactions with others. They described their 'coming out' experiences and how that also helped them create awareness within their organization. They shared that their work, at educating older white males about the non-binary construct and teaching leaders in her organization to be involved in (for example) black, Latina and LGBTQ events without over-stepping their boundaries, has been both a challenging and rewarding aspect of their job.

Toby (and African American male) first talked about his background growing up as an African American man, and then explained the importance of dismantling institutional and social inequities through diversity work. Using the 'Minotaur' as an analogy, he described the monstrous power of prevailing social structures, that misguide individuals. In his work, he shared that he has approached DE&I initiatives and metrics through this lens. Cindy was self-aware of her identity and used it in her work. She argued:

> "I think you bring your lived experiences, which are valuable. That's my advice, is to really know well your own identity, what you would uniquely bring, and then acknowledging that you need other people to help share the... yeah, to share their full story, which is what everybody has to do. I can only capture."

Overall, DE&I practitioners' *roles and responsibilities* represented a wide range of activities, from training, creating awareness, strategic planning and EEO compliance. Penny, formerly in the military working on EEO compliance, described her role as ensuring fair and equitable hiring practices, systems review, annual reviews, comparing with ideal the EEO programming, and conducting engagement surveys. She said she was involved in "a lot of strategic planning and strategic thinking." Similarly, Sam and Karen were also engaged in strategy formulation and planning. Tabitha, Gabby and Rhonda are focused on hiring practices as

per the changing global demographics, and evaluating effectiveness of their programs to meet

business needs. Mona described their role as follows:

> "The real nature of my work is really, really broad. It is to champion and to help advance
> diversity, to be an advisor for fellow leadership team members in terms of what best
> practices are and in best practices, what makes sense in the context of each of the
> colleges from a cultural standpoint, from a discipline standpoint, and industry standpoint.
> Then the inclusion aspect of it is to toggle with all the business units to come up with
> events that really help create a sense of belonging."

DE&I consultants, such as Pamela, Lola and Emma, mainly referred to the problem

solving, skill building and training needs (particularly related to implicit bias) of their client

organizations. Other participants, such as Serena, talked about creating awareness about various

aspects of diversity (such as sexual orientation, gender and race) as well educating people about

fundamentals of DE&I. Lincoln focused on creating inclusive workplaces.

Participants described the following *competencies* needed to effectively manage

diversity: a) Self competency, b) Teams & Communication Competency, c) Leadership, Change

& Organizational Competency, d) Content Expertise and e) Across Cultures Competency. Some

of the skills that participants mentioned in the Self Competency category included having self-

awareness, a learning disposition/ a growth mindset, regulating emotions, having passion,

demonstrating empathy, stepping out of one's own privilege, and owning own voice to advocate

for others. Julia noted:

> "You have to be incredibly self-aware. There is no such thing as a perfect person or an
> unbiased one. You have to understand that it is always a moving target… We have to
> continuously learn and evolve. We have to be prepared for it."

Rhonda highlighted the importance of empathy as follows:

> "Empathy is critical. I think you have to say to yourself, 'Let me examine my narrative,
> my family trajectory, and compare it to someone else's trajectory'. It is the act of moving

through a trajectory of someone's experience, but also comparing your narrative to it I think creates empathy."

A range of *Teams and Communication skills*, including active listening, relationship building, connecting with stakeholders, having honest conversations, and being neutral in interactions emerged as some of the most common inter-personal skills. *Across Cultures* competencies include cultural humility, having a strong sense of cultural identity, and listening to other stories without biases. Lincoln argued:

> "You realize that the role isn't just about diversity and inclusion. It's about human behavior. It's about human interaction. And I'll tell anybody:…[the role is] about people pushing past their fears to get to know one another. And in the end, while differences are important, recognizing differences is important, once you begin to push past those historical barriers and fear that's been created, you realize that no matter what and how different you are, we're more alike than different."

Participants also mentioned the importance of the *content expertise* in terms of (particularly) understanding intersectionality, identifying bias, using the right language, keeping abreast of trends and data, and knowledge about marginalized groups and their current experiences. Finally, participants highlighted *leadership, change and organizational competencies* to include business acumen, influence, strategic planning, strategic thinking, understanding organizational processes, change management, and being a strategic partner (having a seat at the table). Emma argued, "business sense matters on all counts". Mona stated:

> "You need business savvy... You have to understand your stakeholder groups. You have to roll-out plans that are feasible. And what I am finding out is that we have lots of people who know the substance and the content of DE&I, but they are not well equipped to understand the structures and networks that would make collaborations within the organization happen with ease and influence."

Participants expressed their *guiding values* in terms of improving lives, social justice, fairness and equity, morality, equal opportunity, offering opportunities to reach full potential,

empowering people, advocacy, making a social difference, and allowing their own identity to

shape DE&I work. Sam talked about:

> "I think the biggest thing is providing people an opportunity to be their authentic selves, to be able to set others up for success. I think about that 'welcomed, valued, respected, and heard,' All of those things line up for me as my motivation."

Gabby savored the idea of being the 'voice of the voiceless'. Savanah and Cindy talked

about social justice with passion. Lincoln eloquently talked about his identity as an African

American man, and how that influences his values and the lens with which he practices DE&I.

> "Historically, whiteness is a social construct. There was something that was created to those who were empowered and those who were not. The whiteness was the lumping of the people who were to deny this thing called blackness or black. It's an abstract. It's race. And if you were to ask me whether I consider myself to be black, I would say I love what we have done with blackness, but no one has the right to define who I am. And if white is a social construct, so too is red, black and yellow. And I do away with that. I am an African-American man, and I proudly say that African, right? But also know that I embrace our black culture."

Theme 2: Pressures they face. This theme included external pressures, managing

paradoxes of DE&I, their daily struggles and the taxing impact of DE&I as a profession.

During their interviews, participants referred to the *external pressures* that both

mobilized as well as paralyzed them personally in their work, as well as their organizations.

Some of these pressures included growing polarization, rise of hate speech, the confederate flag,

police brutality, the #Metoo movement and unresolved racial tensions in the United States and

globally. Such tensions made DE&I work all the more compelling for many participants. They

also talked about the movement among the younger generations to address societal problems

with compassion and empathy. Mona stated:

> "What makes me hopeful and optimistic are resurgence of compassion, empathy – despite growing polarization. .. we are also witnessing a generation that understands

humanistic empathy. They are driven more by idealism and passion... they want it to be meaningful and to add value to the world and to society."

The interviews also highlighted the participants are faced with *paradoxes*, including personally using a social justice lens, while trying to make a business case within the organization. Some participants learned to merge the two in order to fulfill their roles. Gabby, who works for a large global company, expressed the balance as follows:

> " It really depends on the lens that you come from. Personally, for me it's always been a matter of social justice from the beginning. But that's not - the social justice lens, it's not the lens that I lead with; the lens that I lead with, is that this is about business. If I'm working at a corporation and my job is to grow shareholder value, then my primary lens is the business because what is humane, what is ethical, IS also right for the business."

Yet at the same time, other participants expressed frustration at being expected to show impact in terms of numbers, or leaders paying lip service to 'diversity matters' mantra while not committing resources to DE&I initiatives. Other paradoxes including pushing for and demonstrating agency while facing rigid institutional norms and structures, and fighting for dismantling power structures while also operating within them.

Many participants also expressed the *taxing impact* of DE&I as a profession. Zaire talked about the draining impact of 'being the voice of all men and black Americans', and Pamela referred to the political heaviness of DE&I issues, that can be hard to separate from personal life. Heidi talked about the expectation (from DE&I professionals) that they are perfect human beings. She argued that it is important to be "forgiving of yourself. Making mistakes, owning mistakes and becoming better the next day." Zaire referred to her burn out because of budget constraints, and Karen shared strategies for those burned out- having a personal coach, and joining affinity groups to work through the personal nature of DE&I.

Participants also expressed their *daily struggle*s and the constant dilemmas DE&I practitioners are faced. They mentioned fighting with time constraints in many ways, when employees can't find the time for the training sessions. In addition, Emma also argued,

> "I think that's typically what's thrown out there. We don't have the time. We don't have the money. The reality is that you make the time and you make the money for what's important."

Other struggles included learning to better practice inclusion, dealing with check box approaches within their organizations (which do not prioritize DE&I among the top 3 organizational priorities), a shifting political and business landscape, and a general lack of understanding what DE&I truly entails. Molly argued that DE&I is not a band-aid solution, Zaire said that DE&I shouldn't be treated as quick fix. "It is about cultural change" (Molly, also see below).

Theme 3: Organizational systems and practices they design and/or encounter. This theme is composed of five sub-themes, including lack of leadership commitment, lack of shared understanding, lack of supportive culture, types of organizations (as per stages of DE&I adoption), and disconnect between espoused ideologies and approaches used.

Participants' description of their roles, responsibilities and initiatives highlighted DE&I practitioners engage with a variety of about organizational processes, that sometimes elevate them but also disappoint them (as mentioned previously). The most commonly mentioned factor was the low levels of leadership commitment, which some participants also referred to as the institutional will and buy-in. Tara talked about DE&I should be top driven and ought to be expressed as a top priority. If not, all efforts will fail. Tabitha commented:

> "D&I efforts fail because organizations don't prioritize it. We just throw training and it and think it's fine. If D&I is not a top 3 priority, more likely it will fail. If there is insufficient support at top, immeasurable goals, and lack of accountability…it will fail."

Emma put experienced disconnect between DE&I walk and talk. She highlighted the importance of leadership commitment strongly as follows:

"…how do you leverage the benefits of diversity and turn it into something that's of value to everybody, how do you incorporate and actually practice … **Leadership. Leadership. Leadership. Leadership**. I don't even know where to begin. Let me think about how I can succinctly talk about that. I think that leadership matters because, if leadership is not modeling, then there is a disconnect. If leadership is not fully bought in and understands it, there is a disconnect. And staff and employees are really smart. They hear, see, and feel that disconnect. I don't know why leaders think they don't. It's really fascinating to me. It's like alternate realities. You have to …walk the talk. I mean, YES. And all of those disconnects are felt, are seen. They hinder and stop progress toward inclusion."

Many participants talked about the importance of *shared understanding*, and how it is lacking in their organizations. Sam talked argued, "everyone thinks in their mind, they know what diversity is". She went to elaborate on the challenges of brining all stakeholders on the same page, with respect to what DE&I means and represents.

In the same vein, participants also talked about the importance of a *supportive culture*, that many of them found lacking in their organizations. Emma also shared,

"… so if the culture is not reinforcing, if the culture is not saying diversity and inclusion is valuable, then there is a barrier that hinders whatever progress you're trying to more forward because it is…you're going upstream. Because culture tells you what's important. Culture tells you how to behave. Culture tells you how to act. Culture tells you what is acceptable in your organization. So you're saying diversity, equity, and inclusion, but culture is saying something else…you have a whole lot of wasted time and resources."

Participants' descriptions of their DE&I initiatives indicated organizations can be at different stages of DE&I adoption and implementation. An analysis of interviews reveals (at least) four *types of organizations* in our sample, including, what we refer to as: 1) Reactive- *Just be done with checkboxes*, 2) Start-up- *Piecemeal*, 3) Strategically motivated- *Access* (the *business reality)*, and 4) Culturally embedded- Integrated (*an ideal)*. Type 1 or reactive

organizations are motivated by the need for legal compliance. Their sole focus is to get through

the immediate trouble and most often, leaders expect a mere check box approach. Type 2

organizations are just beginning to focus on DE&I- sometimes as a grass root movement, which

is motivated by market trends and/or internal data (such as engagement surveys); and other times

led by top leader's interest in DE&I. Interviews indicate, at this stage, it is critical to generate a

wider awareness in these organizations and ensure that all stakeholders share a common

understanding of DE&I. During this stage, practitioners use a variety of initiatives that may be

piecemeal in nature, such as employee resource groups, diversity councils, hosting conversations

and/or attending events. However, most common intervention used by Type 2 organizations is

training (particularly bias training) for the employees. Type 3 organizations are strategically

motivated to make a business case for DE&I, focus on hiring quotas and emphasize ROI. These

companies are hard-data driven and focus on developing and measuring metrics. They want to

"win the talent war" (Rhonda). These initiatives are still piecemeal and don't target inclusion.

Finally, while in our study we didn't find a single Type 4 organization- that had embedded DE&I

into the fabric and culture of the organization, many participants talked about the importance of a

cultural change for DE&I to make an impact. This is a type of organization that many

participants and DE&I professionals aspire to and/or idealize. Lola commented,

> "The challenge is getting organizations to understand what it's going to take if they really
> want to see change and make a difference. We've read a lot in journals and in the press
> that, awareness is there but the making a difference and making a change we still have a
> way to go. We're not there yet...You have to make some fundamental shifts in your
> culture, and you need to be consistent. That is the biggest challenge."

Interviews indicate practitioners employ different DE&I ideologies (subsequently

approaches), which are influenced by their own values and (also) guided by the organization they

work at and/or with (in case of consultants). Some approaches include identity and

intersectionality focused initiatives (such as affinity groups, inclusive conversation groups, and employee resource groups- mentioned by Zaire, Heidi, Cindy, Tabitha, Sam, Mona, Penelope, Rhonda, Anna & Lincoln), emphasis on equity (racial equity was mentioned most often- mentioned by Zaire, Pamela, Heidi, Toby, Cindy, Mona, Penelope, Gabby, Emma, Serena & Anna), legal compliance (EEO quotas and hiring- mentioned in particular by Savanah, Karry, Penny & Phoebe), strategic approach (i.e. having a core DE&I strategy, using it to support the business – mentioned by Julia, Toby, Lola, Sam, Mona, Gabby, Karen & Molly), learning oriented approaches (mentioned by Emma), and a cultural change approach aimed at: a) inclusion and belonging (see above- mentioned by Toby, Penny, Penelope, Gabby, Serena, Karen, Anna, Molly & Lincoln), and b) dismantling power structures (mentioned by Participants Toby & Cindy).

> Toby talked about changing the culture, structure and power relations in DE&I work.

> "We need to focus on equity with equality- treat everyone the exact same way- it requires us to remove the system of oppression that we have had in place for decades- that have disadvantaged some and unfairly privileged others."

In addition, multinational companies, because of their presence across the globe, were most focused upon using a multicultural approach to implement DE&I initiatives. Sam talked about the meaning of diversity being completely different in a multinational company, where cultural awareness and cultural competence are considered more important than "race and gender, for example".

Oftentimes, there appeared to be a mismatch between the ideologies participants considered, and what leaders within their organizations pushed for (Refer to Table 2). In some cases, as mentioned previously, some participants have rationalized and learned to merge their values with that of their organizational goals/ strategies (refer to how Gabby manages the tension

above). Other participants continue to look for the right opportunity and environment to make an impact (refer to the discussion regarding culturally embedded DE&I above).

DISCUSSION

The study offers glimpses of DE&I practice within organizations in United States through practitioners' experiences. First and foremost, this study indicates that DE&I discussion isn't ahistorical. Important societal and global events shape our conceptualization, perceptions as well as management of diversity. Incidents of police brutality and hate speech not only fuel debates and discussions inside the organizations which are led by DE&I practitioners, their personal experiences with such incidents have also served as defining moments. Badaracco (1997) argues those faced with defining moments are presented a choice between self-protective silence or proactive management. For many participants, they joined DE&I to make an impact- as a way to proactively manage and address challenges of being the 'other' and/or feeling for the 'other' (for example, Julia, Zaire and Penelope). Second, our study indicates that human experience is critical in the study and practice of DE&I. We should not be reduced to mathematical and rational beings (Villesche, Muhr & Holck, 2018). As humans, we live, breathe and feel. It is through our struggles, sentiments and emotions that we make meaning of the world around us, that shift with time and context. DE&I is a deeply personal and emotional experience; and it is important to strengthen DE&I research and practice by focusing on individual experiences. Such a perspective elevates the role of identity work (and intersectionality) in DE&I. All participants, regardless of the approach they used within their organization and the level of commitment they received from their leaders, spoke of their struggles, backgrounds and experiences that shaped them. In doing DE&I work, they brought their whole selves to the organization (Robbins, 2015).

Interviews indicate that life of a DE&I practitioner is filled with tensions and paradoxes (Smith & Lewis, 2011). Whether it is balancing your own personal values (that in many cases were driven by social purpose) and that of the organization (oftentimes driven by business and profits), participants talked about managing these tensions on a daily basis. Other paradoxes inherent in DE&I work included, 1) demonstrating and/or advocating for personal agency while feeling constrained by organizational norms and structure; 2) (sometimes) following identity-blind practices while being identity conscious and wanting to reframe DE&I debate within their organizations; and 3) being normative in advocating for dismantling power structures and bringing about a cultural change within their organizations, while also experiencing social structures that strengthen class, status and power. From a paradox perspective, long-term success of DE&I professionals would require continuous efforts to meet multiple, divergent demands simultaneously, rather than choosing among them (Besharov, & Sharma, 2017; 178). DE&I is complex and messy. Diversity is not a zero-sum game. Hence, by broadening their sights, leaders can create more inclusive workplaces (Aguinis, 2019).

Interviews also indicate that a majority of the participants entered DE&I profession rather serendipitously (without any training and preparation), it is both surprising and inspiring to see them develop into passionate advocates for others. The study participants bring immense value to their work through their knowledge, identities and purpose. We heard stories of DE&I practitioners serving as coaches, mentors, advisors, partners, and demonstrate great flexibility by immersing themselves with the experiences of people, and also in strategic planning, when needed. We believe that it is important to legitimize the profession in order to elevate the work they do.

Nkomo & Hoobler (2014) conclude that diversity approaches often overlap and sometimes recycled. We found this to be also the case in our sample. Using the diversity management paradigms and approaches (discussed previously), proposed by Ely and Thomas (1996) and strengthened by Podsialowski, Otten and van der Zee (2009), we found no evidence of '*reinforcing homogeneity*', or being '*colorblind'* within our sample organizations. Unsurprisingly (and as expected) a majority of the organizations (and all of private sector organizations) pursued the *access* approach – focused on making a strong business case. We found some organizations to pursue *fairness* paradigm, with their emphasis on EEO and avoiding discriminatory practices. Multinational companies, on other hand, were focused on *multiculturalism* (Nkomo, & Hoobler, 2014). We found *Integration and Learning* to be on minds and lips of DE&I practitioners, however, it was an approach they just idealized. Given their hope for cultural/ structural changes within organizations they led, and in view of the challenges they faced with low levels of leadership commitment and institutional will, the study indicates that it still isn't a reality for many organizations.

Nkomo & Hoobler (2014) also argue that it is important to directly confront "true, often unpleasant issues surrounding racio-ethnic diversity in the workplace, namely racism and its manifestation". One important way to address this limitation is by creating a *psychological safe space*. We found it to be lacking in a majority of organizations within our sample. While some participants talked about having honest and inclusive conversations, only a few participants talked about having a psychological safe space within their organizations for their employees (except Tara, Gabby and Emma).

Shore, Cleveland and Sanchez (2018) present a model of inclusive workplaces, that proposes top management/ leadership commitment to promoting inclusion and avoiding

exclusion as a basic pre-requisite. In terms of processes and practices, they highlight the prevalence of psychological safety, feeling respected, involvement in the work group, influence in decision making, authenticity, recognizing, honoring and advancing diversity. While the study didn't interview employees in sampled organizations, based on DE&I practitioners' experiences (see above low levels of leadership commitment, lack of supportive culture and shared understanding, lack of learning and integration), we believe these organizations didn't have an inclusive environment. The concept of inclusive workplaces, as proposed by Mor Barak (2005, 2011), also refers to a work organization that is not only accepting and utilizing the diversity of its workforce, but is also active in the community; participates in state and federal programs to include population groups such as immigrants and women, and the working poor, collaborates across cultural and national boundaries with a focus on global mutual interest. Mor Barak (2011) argue that inclusion has policy and practice application; has a social responsibility dimension, as well as community development. An inclusive organization is also a good global "citizen". We also found these dimensions to be lacking in our sample organizations. Our overall assessment is that inclusion is just an accepted buzzword, however, it has not been implemented because of organizations' piecemeal, reactive and 'business case' approach to DE&I initiatives, and a general lack of buy-in from the top leadership.

While DE&I practice and research has advanced significantly in the past several decades, the mere mention of the word, 'diversity' still scares people in the US. We know that diversity has been challenging, especially when we reflect on power structures, organizational norms, and deep seated assumptions. Scholars have argued that responsible diversity management involves openness and willingness to learn from each other (Ortlieb, & Sieben, 2013). Lozano and Eschelic (2017) assert that a culture of debate is possible through respect of the 'other'. The

concept of respect, if based on recognition of human dignity, can be valuable in DE&I (Chuapetcharasopon, Neville, Brodt, Lituchy, & Racine, 2018). It is our belief, that in order to address the many challenges faced by DE&I practitioners and to make a positive impact, we must adopt a *humanistic* lens in DE&I. A humanistic view allows us to focus on protecting human dignity and promoting well-being through a culture of respect (Khilji, 2019; Pirson, 2017). We leave readers and practitioners with this idea with the hope that DE&I research and practice flourish with a humanistic view.

CONCLUSIONS

This study is a humble effort to understand DE&I practice by focusing on experiences of DE&I practitioners in the United States, across a variety of sectors. It has several limitations. First, we see diversity through eyes of DE&I practitioners. Hence, the data collected was restricted to what the participants chose to share and what they remembered about DE&I. Along these lines, participants were self-reporting. Self-reports "can be especially responsive to perceived gender roles and desires to respond in a socially appropriate manner" (Eagly, & Wood, 2011, p. 763); therefore, self-reports do not always accurately convey actual behavior. Having said that, Shiller (2019) highlights power of narratives and argues narratives can serve as vectors of change, regardless of their valid or fallacious nature. Second, there are biases inherent in qualitative work because of researchers' biases that impact the study (Merriam, 2009). In an effort to maintain awareness of this bias, we identified and mitigated our bias throughout the research process. We also utilized other methods such as memoing, member checks and peer review in order to manage biases (Merriam, 2009). Third, the phenomenon of this study was bounded by the context of one participant per organization and, as such, may not give us a complete picture. We realize that since our focus was on DE&I practice as experienced by

practitioners, the findings may not be applicable to others in the same organization. Please note that we do consider it important to include the voice of diverse individuals to the discussion, however, it wasn't feasible for the present study. We encourage future studies to address these limitations.

Despite these limitations, the present study has made some important contributions to the literature. It has attempted to use the experiences of DE&I practitioners to highlight the importance of the 'human experience' in DE&I research. The study indicates although DE&I practice hasn't advanced much in the past decade or so, many strong and well-intentioned DE&I practitioners have joined the profession. Their struggles are also our daily struggles, as we all know inequality is something we experience every single day- in terms of gender, racial, class and economic aspects (Acker, 2006). This study indicates that we need to step outside the box - and create spaces for new approaches, in which there is room for experimentation with (for example, humanistic) ways of leading DE&I. Given the pressing socio-cultural, political and economic challenges that directly impact us, it is our responsibility to come together to move the DE&I needle forward. Otherwise, organizations would be recycling the same old DE&I approaches in a piecemeal fashion, however, with little impact and increased frustration.

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Table 1
Participant Profile

Pseudonyms	Self-described Gender	Self-described Race/ Ethnicity	Industry/ Sector	Espoused Ideologies- Approaches Used in the Organization
Participant 1- Julia	Cis- female	African American	Education	Strategic (Business Case)- Fairness
Participant 2- Zaire	Cis- male	African American	Non Profit	Equity- Strategic (Business Case)
Participant 3- Pamela	Cis-female	White Caucasian	Consulting	Equity- Strategic (Business Case)
Participant 4- Tara	Cis-female	African American	Education	Equity- Legal Compliance
Participant 5- Savanah	Cis-female	White Caucasian	Education	Legal Compliance
Participant 6- Karry	Cis-female	White Caucasian	Public	Legal Compliance- Cultural Change (needed)
Participant 7- Heidi	Queer	White Caucasian	Private (Global)	Equity- Strategic (Business Case)
Participant 8- Toby	Cis-male	African American	Education	Equity- Strategic (Business Case)- Cultural Change (needed
Participant 9- Cindy	Cis-female	African American	Consulting	Equity & Social Justice
Participant 10- Lola	Cis-female	White Caucasian	Consulting	Strategic (Business Case)
Participant 11- Tabitha	Cis-female	African American	Consulting	Equity
Participant 12- Penny	Cis-female	White Caucasian	Public	Legal Compliance- Cultural Change (needed)
Participant 13- Tabby	Cis-female	African American	Public	Legal Compliance
Participant 14- Sam	Cis-female	White Caucasian	Private (Global)	Strategic (Business Case)- Cultural
Participant 15- Mona	Queer	African American	Education	Equity- Strategic (Business Case)
Participant 16- Penelope	Cis-female	African American	Private	Equity- Programming and Community Development
Participant 17- Gabby	Cis-female	African American	Private (Technology)	Equity- Strategic (Business Case)- Cultural Change (needed)
Participant 18- Emma	Cis-female	African American	Consulting	Equity & Learning

Participant 19- Rhonda	Cis-female	White Caucasian	Private (Financial)	Strategic (Business Case)
Participant 20- Serena	Cis-female	Asian	Private (Global)	Equity- Cultural Change (needed)
Participant 21- Karen	Cis-female	White Caucasian	Private (Healthcare)	Strategic (Business Case)- Cultural Change (needed)
Participant 22- Anna	Cis-female	Asian	Education	Equity- Cultural Change (needed)
Participant 23- Phoebe	Cis-female	African American	Education	Legal Compliance
Participant 24- Andrea	Cis-female	White Caucasian	Education	Equity- Legal Compliance
Participant 25- Molly	Cis-female	African American	Private (Communication)	Strategic (Business Case)- Cultural Change (needed)
Participant 26- Lincoln	Cis-male	African American	Private (Media)	Strategic (Business Case)- Cultural Change (needed)

Table 2
Themes and Sub-Themes

First order theme	Second Order themes	Overarching themes
Who I am, What I bring, background, lived experience, my story	Identity	Theme 1: People they are
Problem solving, training, educating, strategic planning, EEO compliance, annual reviews, engagement surveys, hiring, evaluating effectiveness, business needs, needs assessment, programming, collaborate, champion, advance diversity, creating an awareness	Work/ Role	
Self-Competency (self-awareness, learning, growth mindset, having passion, empathy, stepping out of privilege, voice to advocate for others) **Teams Competency** (Active listening, relationship building, connecting with stakeholders, having honest conversations, being neutral) **Leadership & Change Competency** (business acumen, influence, strategic planning, strategic thinking, understanding organizational processes, change management, being a strategic partner) **Across Cultures Competency** (cultural humility, cultural identity, listening to others' stories without bias) **Content Expertise** (using appropriate language, staying current, knowledge of data and trends, knowledge marginalized communities and their current experiences)	Competencies	
Improving lives, social justice, equity, morality, equal opportunity, empowering, helping people reach full potential, advocacy, being the voice of voiceless	Guiding Values	
Hate speech, police brutality, #Metoo, racial tensions, growing polarization, compassion & empathy movement	External Pressures	Theme 2: Pressures they face
Social justice- business value, agency-structure, identity-blind- identity conscious, normative – social structures	Paradoxes	
Time, better practice with inclusion, dealing with check box approaches, not wanting band-aid solutions, shifting landscape, the need for cultural change	Daily Struggles	
Emotional, political heaviness, high expectations, being human, budget constraints	Taxing Emotional Impact	

Lack of leadership understanding, not among the top priorities, no buy in, lack of institutional will	Lack of Leadership Commitment	**Theme 3:** **Processes and Practices they design and encounter**
Fabric, way of working in the organization, norms	Lack of Supportive Culture	
Check box led, piecemeal practice, reactive, making a business case, creating awareness, the need for cultural change, ERG, access, events, using market data, legal compliance, EEO, bias training, diversity council, quotas, metrics, war for talent, affinity groups	Types of Organizations	
Not on the same page, confusion, diverse understanding	Lack of Shared Understanding	
Identity, intersectionality, equity, legal compliance, dismantling power, strategic approach, learning-oriented, inclusion & belonging, dismantling power structures	Disconnect between their Espoused Ideologies & the Approaches Used	