

## Relational Responsibilisation and Diversity Management in the 21st Century: The Case for Reframing Equality Regulation

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**Steve Vincent**   
Newcastle University, UK

**Ana Lopes**   
Newcastle University, UK

**Elina Meliou**   
Brunel University London, UK

**Mustafa Özbilgin**  
Brunel University London, UK

### Abstract

This article critiques equality regulation within neoliberal policy regimes and suggests an alternative. We argue that, globally, neoliberal regimes exacerbate social divisions by individualising responsibilities for addressing inequalities. Consequentially, a new policy direction for equality regulation is required. Using the UK economy as an exemplar, we make the case for relational responsibilisation, which involves raising awareness of workplace inequalities on an international basis; attributing responsibility for inequalities onto specific socioeconomic causes and institutions; and systematically developing policies and practices that extend accountability for and ameliorate the negative consequences of workplace inequalities. Theoretically, Bourdieusian social critique and realist sociological imagination are used to conceive responsibilisation in relational terms and to imagine a policy agenda that might make societies more responsible for tackling the forms of inequality they produce. Our overall argument is for the creation of a new equality, diversity and inclusion-aware form of social democracy.

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### Corresponding author:

Steve Vincent, Newcastle University Business School, 5 Barrack Road, Newcastle upon Tyne, NE1 4SE, UK.  
Email: [steve.vincent@newcastle.ac.uk](mailto:steve.vincent@newcastle.ac.uk)

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**Introduction**

This article extends a critique of Equality, Diversity and Inclusion (EDI) practices, which emerge from fundamental principles promoting fair treatment, equal opportunities and respect for all individuals, regardless of their differences (Özbilgin, 2023). We position our critique within a strand of critical scholarship that can be traced back to the 1990s, when there was a conceptual shift among EDI practitioners away from equality and towards diversity and inclusion. This shift arguably obscured rather than attended to inequalities (Zanoni et al., 2010), with the management of diversity resting on a new understanding of differences – as strategic assets that could be managed to provide competitive advantage (Zanoni et al., 2010): a business case rationale, which largely replaced social justice arguments for equality-related policies (Noon, 2007). Since this time, much of the mainstream diversity literature presents a simplistic version of this business case, even when it lacks empirical support (Ely and Thomas, 2020: 118). More recently, and in response to a greater awareness that simply increasing the number of under-represented groups is insufficient, the concept of inclusion has gained more popularity among practitioners and scholars. However, Oswick and Noon (2014) question whether the recent popularity of inclusion, in reality, parallels the earlier shift away from equality, with inclusion practices and rhetoric suffering from the same issues as diversity: they do not challenge or reconfigure the structures of power and dominance that created inequalities, and the very need for inclusion (Adamson et al., 2021; Ely and Thomas, 2020). This critical line of enquiry combines to tell us that the ‘E’ of EDI may be its first and essential component.

We extend our critique following this introduction, in which we use Bourdieusian social theory to critique the practice of EDI under neoliberal governance regimes. We argue that neoliberal forms of governance emerge from the belief ‘that human wellbeing can be best advanced by liberating individual entrepreneurial freedoms and skills within an institutional framework characterized by strong private property rights, free markets and free trade’ (Harvey, 2005: 2). We argue that neoliberal regimes are governed by a specific system of rules, and we extend a novel Bourdieusian conceptualisation – doxic system – to theorise such systems. We demonstrate how neoliberal doxic systems result in poor EDI interventions because neoliberal regimes are incompatible with equality policies. Indeed, inequalities are propelled globally, as a consequence of the expansion of international free enterprise, a process that has concentrated power and resources in already developed economies (see Gill, 1995), and increased and reproduced rather than eliminated global inequalities (Stiglitz, 2012).

We root our thinking within Bourdieusian social critique (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992), which is often used to study less tractable and culturally rooted forms of diversity-based disadvantage (in this journal, see Ashley and Empson, 2017; Umeh et al., 2023), as well as subjective experiences, which other accounts have tended to neglect. There are

few similar studies to ours, as we draw on Bourdieu to theorise rules and their impacts on people/subjects. We take inspiration from Seierstad et al. (2021), who studied the impact of regulations that mandated a minimum of 40% for each gender on the non-executive boards of Norwegian companies. They demonstrated that this structural change affected societal value systems, over time, by legitimating a broader spectrum of recognition among organisational leaders.

We also consider subjective aspects of class relations, and how these shape the redistribution of resources within social formations, and consider policy interventions that might promote greater acceptance of diversity in all parts of the economy. In doing so, we outline or start to develop an alternative to neoliberal governance, which imagines an EDI-aware policy agenda that is capable of stimulating practical responses among those who desire more equal forms of globalisation (George et al., 2012; Özbilgin and Erbil, 2021). We argue that diversity-based disadvantages should be tackled through a relational approach to *responsibilising* individuals, employers, regulators, non-government organisations and the State for the intersecting categories of disadvantage that international employment systems impel.

There is already a strong case for the responsabilisation of employers for EDI (Acker, 2006; Özbilgin and Erbil, 2021), but existing research demonstrates that inequalities persist due to a lack of systemic responsabilisation, which hinders EDI (Amis et al., 2020). For example, while research on organisational leaders demonstrates a widespread and growing awareness of the importance of EDI (Randel et al., 2018), a recent report (OECD, 2020) highlights that senior managerial commitment to inclusiveness often fails to cascade through line management and that indifference is a significant barrier to change. Elsewhere, observations that majority groups come to corporately capture the management of minoritised interests are compelling (Calvard et al., 2020); as are observations that corporate practices actively construct forms of disadvantage (Sang et al., 2022). We also know that workplace cultures often unconsciously exclude specific categories of workers (Ashley, 2010; Randle et al., 2015). This suggests a significant need for a broader-based approach to responsabilising social agents and agencies to promote more equitable economic outcomes. To contribute in this area, we ask (1) what are the conditions under which the systemic raising awareness about diversity-based disadvantages is more likely? And (2) what are the conditions under which EDI practitioners are enabled or empowered to develop knowledge, practices and interventions that extend mutual human flourishing?

We argue that, while existing research has done much to critique EDI interventions under neoliberal policy regimes (e.g. Ely and Thomas, 2020), rather less attention has been given to the development of an alternative policy agenda. Our effort begins to fill this lacuna. We acknowledge others who have argued for new forms of regulation that focus on the quality of working life (Warhurst and Knox, 2022), and arguments that we should be ‘using HRM competencies, skills, knowledge, and attitudes to contribute to the common good and to help solve the “grand challenges” of our time’ (Aust Ehnert et al., 2020: 5). These voices suggest we should place collective interests above individual ones, and that human resource management (HRM) professionals and EDI practitioners, in particular, should form a significant part of the motor of change. Against the ideological individualism and marketisation of neoliberal idealism, which narrow the concerns of

HR practitioners (see Marchington, 2015), HRM and EDI practitioners are arguably uniquely positioned to pursue and become beneficiaries of responsabilisation because it serves their individual and collective professional interests to do so.

We also argue that novel forms of regulation can make a positive socioeconomic difference by promoting responsabilisation at different levels within and beyond workplaces. While we might expect a trade-off between economic efficiency, on the one hand, and social justice and reduced inequality, on the other (see Laroche, 2020), this relationship is arguably not inevitable. It is possible to imagine a novel EDI-aware social democratic alternative capable of challenging and transforming the neoliberal orthodoxy. This alternative would seek out equality-efficiency trade-offs that can offer positive-sum outcomes, increasing aggregate goods (see Esping-Andersen and van Kersbergen, 1992).

## **An outline of a neoliberal field of systemic inequalities in the UK**

Bourdieuian social theory (see Bourdieu, 1986, 1990; Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992) extends a highly flexible lexicon often used to study EDI issues (Tatli and Özbilgin, 2012). For Bourdieu, the *micro-level* of social interaction is constituted of interacting collective *habitus*, or our different ways of being, which form a structuring-structure that guides social action. Our collective *habitus* is subjectively internalised and constituted of past experiences and so offers a ‘feel for the game’ or a sense of local norm systems. Our social relations, then, combine to form a *field*, which is the *macro-level* of social order. Fields can be distinguished in terms of the specific and unique resources, or *species of capital*, they contain, and access to resources depends on people’s social positions within that field. For example, access to social favours, or *social forms of capital*, depends on having access to those parts of the field (clubs, associations, kinship groups, employers, etc.), which facilitate or enable access to other forms of resources: *economic, cultural, and symbolic capital*.

Access to social favours also depends on the reproduction of norms, such as mutual obligations, that are policed by group members (see Elder-Vass, 2010). Social rules (*doxa*), then, combine to form rule systems that define the dominant and subordinate positions within social fields, as agents struggle to access and benefit from field resources. For example, rules relating to access to work opportunities and/or the hierarchies of economic organisations define the winners and losers in employment systems, and so, from this point of view, the political economy is a *doxic system*: or a system of norms, rules and regulations that combine variously to govern distribution and redistribution of forms of capital within and through economic organisation, and which then conditions inter-field struggles.

Arguably, the Bourdieusian lexicon also adds much to our ability to theorise employment systems. For example, we also know that the *doxa* of neoliberal regimes favours the logics of enterprise and markets within decision-making (see Brown, 2015). Rather than social and democratic logics, neoliberal politics reify deregulated industries and prioritise individual needs over collective or social needs (see Kotz, 2009). People consequently tend to internalise forms of governmentality that normalise individual responsibilities for shaping choices and chances (Moisander et al., 2018), with workers being encouraged to take individual responsibility for their own

socioeconomic needs as competitive individualists, preoccupied with investing and enhancing their human capital (Fleming, 2017).

The UK exemplifies a ‘liberal market’ variety of capitalism (Hall and Soskice, 2001), which has embraced neoliberalism in its policy regime since 1979 (McGimpsey, 2017). It is also an interesting case, as it may suffer a declining ability to tackle forms of inequality as it ‘decouples’ from the European Union (see Fagan and Rubery, 2018). Like many other countries, EDI interventions in the UK are typically limited to legally protected categories of equality (Tatli and Özbilgin, 2012), or the types of gender, ethnicity, age, sexual orientation and disability-related equality laws. Aspects of diversity that are not regulated are typically neglected. For example, practitioners struggle to include socioeconomic class in the content of EDI interventions (Özbilgin et al., 2014) because tackling class-based inequalities requires a fundamental transformation of doxa relating to the distribution of resources (Zanoni and Janssens, 2015; Zanoni et al., 2010).

Recent regulatory shifts have increased employer responsibilities for protected categories of workers in the UK, with publicly funded organisations now having a duty to address protected characteristics since the 2010 Equality Act (Hussain et al., 2022). Elsewhere, responsibility for diversity has changed due to a shift in welfare systems and organisational regulations (see Esping-Andersen, 2015). In the past, for example, disability issues were handled by the welfare state via disability benefits and supported employment. After 1995, the Disability Discrimination Act made employers legally responsible for making reasonable adjustments to accommodate workers with disabilities. With this shift, responsibility for managing disability issues shifted from the State to the employers, with HRM or EDI practitioners typically becoming responsible for ensuring regulatory compliance.

Beyond their role in policing legislative requirements within employers, these EDI practitioners have arguably been overfocused on the ‘business case’, which reflects a neoliberal aesthetic (Özbilgin and Tatli, 2011). The business case spotlights employers’ responsibility for EDI and assumes this can be created instrumentally, and without extensive regulation (Dickens, 1999; Jonsen et al., 2013). However, while evidence indicates that firms with more diverse boards can have competitive advantages (Miller and Carmen-Triana, 2009), critical scholars demonstrate that voluntary EDI initiatives based on business case arguments often fail to deliver results and can even hinder genuine progress (Conley et al., 2019; Ely and Thomas, 2020; Noon, 2017; Roberson et al., 2017; Wrench, 2005). This is because business case arguments assume EDI can and should synchronise the interests of management and minority groups within employees (Kandola and Fullerton, 1994); for example, by developing a diverse and useful talent pool (DiTomaso et al., 2007). This assumption fails to hold water because competitive pressures within the political economy preclude ‘costly’ investments in people’s skills (Kaufman, 2015), and so an instrumental, firm-level approach often fails to deliver (Tatli et al., 2012).

Too many EDI practices are also aimed at individuals, such as training and education intended to develop the knowledge, skills and competencies to interact appropriately within diverse settings (Noon, 2017). Such interventions echo neoliberal arguments relating to human capital (Becker, 1993), as they assume that educating workers about equitable interpersonal relations will yield beneficial results for diverse populations and the employment system more broadly. This also suggests inequitable labour-market

outcomes emerge from individual choices rather than other social determinants, which individuals may be unaware of and powerless to affect. Arguably, this overemphasis on individual-level responsabilisation creates only the illusion of choice and control, as we should each hold responsibility for managing diversity within our workplaces.

In contradiction to this ideal, research reveals 'efforts to moderate managerial bias through diversity training and diversity evaluations are least effective at increasing the share of white women, black women, and black men in management' (Kalev et al., 2006: 589). Consequently, while individual-level responsabilisation is important in tackling and highlighting cognitive bias, action at this level is unlikely to result in systemic change because individual-level powers are feeble in comparison to the causal forces of the political economy, and may even be counterproductive. The assumption is that, if individuals do not discriminate against protected categories of workers, equitable outcomes will follow. This shifts responsibility onto workers, who are trained to value EDI and to eliminate interpersonal bias. In turn, this pushes responsibility into employers' disciplinary systems, which police the proper conduct of interpersonal relations. The logic of this institutional arrangement is that, if fairness flows from the regulation of the individual level, there is no need to attend to systemic and structured forms of discrimination: these are presumed to melt into the air.

However, this individual-level focus may also lead to a presumption of unfairness for overrepresented groups, increasing the likelihood that traditionally advantaged groups will perceive themselves as marginalised and victims of individual-level discrimination (Dover et al., 2020). Arguably, the current situation may have the effect of radicalising those already at comparative advantage by enabling the rhetoric of right-wing populism (Vassilopoulou et al., 2022). The divisive political narrative of right-wing populism is associated with increasingly inequitable workplace relations, which neoliberal economic policies impel (Cumming et al., 2020). However, right-wing populism extends from a divisive anti-diversity agenda (Cammaerts, 2022) and negative emotions (Salmela and von Scheve, 2017), in a way that blames categories of difference for the privations neoliberal policy choices create. In short, doxic systems informed by a neoliberal ethos are toxic and, arguably, corrosive of relational responsabilisation.

Elsewhere, Bourdieu has been used to study how institutional actors with competing interests can come together to affect the emergence of EDI-based policies and practices (Özbilgin and Tatli, 2011). However, powerful collective and organised forms of responsabilisation appear incompatible with neoliberalism, and so responsabilisation at higher institutional levels, such as in relations between employers, regulatory organisations, or within broader social movements, is likely to remain significantly weakened. For example, while trade unions in the UK have been paying much greater attention to diversity-based forms of inequality (see Kirton and Greene, 2006; Kirton and Guillaume, 2022), they have also been significantly weakened (see Dorey, 2016), as new rules and regulations mean industrial action is now much more difficult to take, and only 26% of workers are covered by collective bargaining (Burke, 2019). As Kirton and Greene (2006) note, while trade unions are increasingly and seriously engaging with diversity, their ability to influence and act at the workplace level has become relatively weak.

While recent research highlights the significance of trade unions as worker collectives, as well as other social movements (Soytemel, 2013) and solidarity initiatives

(Daskalaki, 2017; Meliou, 2020) as conduits of collective social demands, and therefore as key actors in societal-level responsabilisation, the UK context inhibits their ability to champion EDI-based workplace issues (Kirton, 2021; Moore and Wright, 2012). For example, although EDI representatives have emerged within trade unions and used individual rights to leverage change (Moore and Wright, 2012), they have no statutory rights in relation to their duties (Bacon and Hoque, 2012). We conclude that neoliberal expansion, austerity measures and the march of right-wing populism have pushed such social justice demands to the margins (Özbilgin and Erbil, 2021).

## **Reframing the debate: Bourdieusian class relations and realist thinking**

Having critiqued neoliberal policy regimes, we now turn to the task of imagining an alternative. We start, again, at the micro-level, because Bourdieu's notion of habitus or internalised intersubjectivity also fundamentally reframes how we think about social class as a category for EDI interventions (see also Anthias, 2001). While HR departments tend to gather data on proxies to individual capital endowments – such as their qualifications, pay grades and employment histories – which indicate the objective trappings of social class, there has been little attention to social class as a symbolic, social and cultural category in organisations. Bourdieusian analysis of class positions people in a web of relations in the workplace, wherein their symbolic worth cannot be understood through their objective capital endowments alone. It is also intimately tied to subjective perceptions, which depend on the collective habitus and relations with peers (see also Sayer, 2005).

This deeper and richer theorisation of social class, which is critically engaged with the objective–subjective dichotomy, can enable our appreciation of social class dynamics at work, and how interpersonal relations can result in more or less tolerance of inequality. For example, one Bourdieusian analysis of elite professional service firms in London demonstrated that class-based cultural capital had negative implications for those socially excluded, as well as for more talented workers from 'outsider' groups (Ashley and Empson, 2017). Such symbolic and class-based forms of disadvantage always also intersect with other categories of disadvantage, such as gender and ethnicity. Umeh et al. (2023) demonstrate this point in a Bourdieusian study of ethnic identities and class fractions within the Nigerian banking sector, concluding:

language (verbal and non-verbal communication) provided the required structure and legitimacy such that the structure through which status was projected (language) qualified one for acceptance, endorsement or ostracism rather than status alone. (p. 21)

In such complex symbolic worlds, action should be taken to rescue responsabilisation from an overly individualised form, towards a relational appreciation of individual agents within coalitions at work, which recognise the collective nature of value-making in ways that promote mutual benefits rather than exclusions. Our objective is thus to imagine a field within which doxic systems might promote EDI practices that are more engaged with mutual flourishing.

In this regard, the Bourdieusian lexicon is not without its methodological limitations. Vincent and Pagan (2019) argue that this lexicon ‘lacks consistent concepts to identify the sub-structures, arrangements, articulations, mechanisms, organization, institutions (etc.) of fields’ (p. 194) and that Bourdieusian analysis too often prioritises the study of *habitus*, as a ‘structuring structure’, to the neglect of the analytically separable causal properties of fields and subfields (also see Archer, 2010; cf. Özbilgin and Tatli, 2011). Arguably, researchers interested in exploring the causal processes within a political economy framework, in particular, must find conceptual placeholders to deconstruct and reconstruct fields in terms of their constituent parts, elements and/or institutional forms and arrangements, and in terms of the specific outcomes they propel (Vincent and Pagan, 2019), such as levels of responsabilisation.

To pursue such an agenda, we argue that we must align Bourdieusian analysis with realist forms of enquiry using sociological imagination (Watson, 2009). We take realist forms of enquiry as including a range of broadly compatible philosophical approaches, including critical (Edwards et al., 2014), policy-based (Pawson, 2013) and pragmatic (Watson, 2010) forms of realism. Sociological imagination, on the other hand, represents an abductive effort to explore the world from multiple points of view, in the effort to build a more total picture of the whole (Watson, 2009: 864). In our case, we seek to imagine the parts of a doxic system that might combine to create or define an EDI-aware form of social democracy, and argue that this could enable the emergence of agents and agencies that contain more responsabilised forms of *habitus*.

Realist approaches encourage researchers to empirically and analytically deconstruct fields into their constituent parts, which are real, and which combine to produce specific effects, which impel emergent events, or the things that happen (Meliou et al., 2021; Vincent and Pagan, 2019). However, these effects do not have to be realised or imagined by human beings to be real, so that what we observe (e.g. a specific rate of promotions for women) is a consequence of its causal circumstances or history, independently of our knowledge of it (see Collier, 1994). In this regard, it is not only the collective *habitus* that explains the emergence of the field. This is because the field can be viewed as containing objectifiable *social structures*, which form and are constituted by an open system of hierarchically organised social entities (people, teams, employers, trade unions, State apparatuses and suchlike), which interact and are specifically causal, in potentially unrealised ways, as they combine in complex ways to shape the emergence of events.

For realist thinkers, this makes theory or conceptual resources essential in making causal connections between levels, and revealing ‘deeper’ causes of events and social happenings. For example, a realist thinker would argue that institutional discrimination and inequality regimes (see Acker, 2006) are often a consequence of social activities within doxic systems – collective practices, acceptances, positions, rules, etc. – which combine to affect disadvantage without the knowledge of those involved. ‘Middle-range’ concepts (such as institutional discrimination and inequality regimes) thus help explain the emergence of structured forms of disadvantage, often in the absence of explicit forms of discrimination, such as overt forms of sexism and racism in the collective *habitus* of field members, which might explain discrimination as an individual responsibility. It is the empirical trace of inequalities that is revealing, and which should prompt a search for their causes and alternatives.



A broad range of middle-range concepts has been used to study workplaces (Vincent et al., 2020) as entities within a hierarchically organised doxic system, with their attendant form of work organisation, employment relations, HRM, EDI and other management practices. Workplaces typically have competition, efficiency and/or profitability-driven governance arrangements because they exist within a complex context that includes competitive and/or cooperative relations with other employers and with customers and suppliers across supply chains (see also Lakhani et al., 2013). They also reside within broader systems of regulation and enforcement agencies, which shape the rules of the game (see Henderson et al., 2002), and they are affected by interactions between work and life domains within a broader sociocultural context, which also influences workplace inequalities (see Den Dulk et al., 2013). In the effort to make some sense of this complexity, we now take on the task of imagining and/or starting to develop an alternative to neoliberal regimes. In particular, we imagine how the parts of economic orders may be reformed into a new generative structure that may enable greater mutual flourishing through relational responsabilisation.

## Imagining an EDI-aware social democratic alternative

In place of a neoliberal agenda, we argue for political discourses, policies and practices that encourage collective *habitus* that emphasises mutual flourishing, and which also promote social and democratic engagement with, rather than opposition to, market forces. In making this case, we contribute to ongoing debates about ‘inclusive growth’ (see Demirgüç-Kunt and Singer, 2017; George et al., 2012) and to what EDI-aware forms of social democracy might look like (see Giddens, 1998; Ryner, 2010). We follow others in arguing that the relative equality of all groups must be catalysed by concomitant institutional and societal changes (Dobbin and Kalev, 2016; Giddens, 1998). Consequentially, an agenda that responsabilises employers for intersecting categories of disadvantage must also represent an effective way to tackle class-based forms of disadvantage, such as relative precarity (Meliou et al., 2023).

Important questions relate to the porosity and openness of the fields and subfields that establish social boundaries, and to the mechanisms available to make fields and subfields more open to people of diverse backgrounds. For example, where acculturation processes impel specific social class collective *habitus*, or narrow cultural *proposition registers*, such as the upper-class ethos identified in professional service firms (Ashley and Empson, 2017), we must consider creative and innovative means to ensure that workers from atypical class positions are made to feel welcome, treated fairly and feel it is possible to act with integrity and authenticity without a compulsion to pretend, hide or alter their salient social class identities.

In such cases, the sharing of responsibilities is vital to making EDI everyone’s responsibility, because individual responsibilities always exist relationally, within solidarity and compassion for the other, and within organised coalitions (Dennissen et al., 2020; Villeseche et al., 2022). Examples include LGBTQ+ communities organising to support working-class miners during a 1980s industrial dispute in the UK (Kelliher, 2014), as well as other support to the LGBTQ+ community, where allies who are not themselves members of that community provide a coalition that can force legal and societal changes

(Kamasak et al., 2019). Intersectional sensitivity to the process and systems of domination that marginalise or discriminate (McBride et al., 2015) thus offer a better way to conceive the individuals' relation with responsabilisation, or within a network of shared knowledge and interests.

Despite the disabling neoliberal global context, social movements such as the #metoo, women's and pride marches, and the #blacklivesmatter movements have demanded greater responsabilisation for EDI visible on an international stage. However, while failing to respond to social movements is an ineffective and unwise way of regulating diversity issues, research suggests there is limited recognition of the moral demands of these movements by regulators, organisations and individuals in general (Moore and Wright, 2012). For instance, in the UK's current neoliberal policy context, and in the wake of Brexit, which has polarised the country around race-based issues and created novel, racially inscribed vulnerabilities (see Burrell and Hopkins, 2019), transformative regulatory change is unlikely. This creates various political challenges for those who desire a shift to a more equitable society: a new political mandate is needed for change to happen. However, and despite this challenging context, we must recognise that social movements can and do inspire greater national, organisational and individual responsabilisation, and so they can transform political discourses and attitudes.

The EDI-aware social democratic political agenda we advocate argues for regulations that actively encourage more responsabilised employers and to reshape collective and individual *habitus*. Responsibilisation should act through the reputations of consumers, employers and societal leaders by rendering them more accountable for the workplace inequalities their choices impel. Taken to a logical conclusion, complex indices of class and other forms of EDI, could be constructed and used to evaluate the relative statuses and positions at work.

Responsibilisation can also act through positive incentive systems. Governments can use tax incentives to stimulate inclusive growth strategies (Ravšelj and Aristovnik, 2018). Marketing opportunities can be offered to employers who are demonstrably more EDI-aware than their rivals (for a discussion see Vredenburg et al., 2020). Industry forums may share knowledge and feedback about specific EDI initiatives (Jonsen et al., 2013).

The implications of this agenda article apply variously within different national economies, but we also know that changes to collective *habitus* can and do follow regulatory changes (Demirgüç-Kunt and Singer, 2017; Seierstad et al., 2021). One policy that appears to be changing practices in the UK is gender pay gap reporting, which is a class and gender issue (Healy and Ahamed, 2019). After 2017, the UK Gender Pay Gap Reporting (GPGR) regulations obliged organisations with over 250 employees to annually publish the difference between the average earnings of men and women (UK Government Equalities Office, 2018). The Equality and Human Rights Commission (EHRC), which is responsible for implementing the regulations, can take enforcement action and open an investigation if there are suspicions of concealment of pay gaps. This may lead to 'unlimited' fines (EHRC, 2018), although no company has yet been fined (Barr and Perraudin, 2019).

This regulation is weak, as sanctions are not related to the size or form of the gender pay gap. The regulations were also suspended during the Covid pandemic and did not start again until October 2021, creating a monitoring vacuum during a period of great

change (see Jones et al., 2022). However, it is, perhaps somewhat naively, expected that organisations will voluntarily address their gender pay gap for reputational reasons, which should supposedly increase gender diversity in positions of power and authority. It is noteworthy that although not mandatory, around 48% of employers subject to the GPGR regulations publish an action plan outlining how they intend to address the gap (UK Government Equalities Office, 2018). Initial research suggests the new rules are having an effect. Blundell (2021) estimates that reporting requirements led to a 1.6% (or 19%) narrowing of the gender pay gap within reporting companies, although this was due to a decline in male rather than an increase in female wages.

While this outcome is, in some ways, encouraging, as it demonstrates that the potential for reputational damage is impacting behaviour/practice, there are obvious limitations to this approach. Conley et al. (2019) demonstrate that transparency alone will not generate the desired outcomes for closing the gender pay gap, and Özbilgin and Erbil (2021) show that there is also a need to push for more coercive regulation. However, the implementation of the regulations has focused attention on gender pay gaps and the reasons behind them (EHRC, 2018), and led the UK government to conduct a consultation exercise on ethnicity pay reporting (Clarke, 2018). While these have been impeded by the pandemic and arguments that ethnicity is too broad a signifier, a recent House of Commons Women and Equalities Committee report argued, ‘Government should publish proposals for introducing ethnicity and disability pay gap reporting within the next six months’ (House of Commons, 2021: 38). We welcome this position, and argue that research and practice directed at intersectional pay gaps (Woodhams et al., 2015) should be encouraged.

Our examples suggest support from State agencies and, internationally, from non-governmental organisations (NGOs) such as the International Labour Organization (ILO), will be vital to create regulations that responsabilise employers. At an international level, regulatory drivers for responsabilisation can come from ‘soft’ forms of regulation, such as international conventions and charters. Examples include the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the Convention on the Elimination of All Kinds of Discrimination Against Women, the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination, and the Sustainable Development Goals of the United Nations Global Compact. These international agreements and conventions set the moral justification for EDI and underpin international responsabilisation. In their broadest manifestation, ‘common good’ arguments could be used to expand the responsabilisation across national borders, and political capital can be used as a source of leverage for international agencies.

Powerful agencies, such as the ILO, should be encouraged to both establish international standards and have these enforced, vertically, through transnational supply chains and value-chain approach to responsabilisation (see Özbilgin et al., 2016; Thomas and Turnbull, 2017). Within this approach, larger organisations are held more accountable for equalities across their value chains. Accountability at this level holds the potential to bring market discipline to those seeking to positively affect EDI practices across supply chains. Nike and Levi Strauss, for example, preserve their reputations by engaging with forms of organisational transparency, in which they openly published a list of their global supplier factories. This has improved working conditions because such lists empower watchdogs to monitor and pressure business leaders to reduce harmful behaviour (Doorey, 2011). Transparency is thus expected to encourage more responsabilised collective habitus.

However, while globally, powerful firms already claim to impose employment standards and benchmarks within their supply chains, these are often neither upheld by suppliers nor strongly enforced by customers (see Alamgir and Banerjee, 2018). We should consequently find ways to oblige and enable customers to hold their suppliers to account, and vice versa, for employment standards across supply chains (see Yang et al., 2008), which then can have positive consequences for workers, such as stable employment and increased welfare (Helfen et al., 2018; Mawa et al., 2022).

More regionally, various national-level NGOs should also be incentivised to take responsabilisation seriously (Bartels-Ellis et al., 2019). In particular, trade unions (Hoque and Bacon, 2014) and professional organisations hold the potential to play a significant role in advancing an EDI agenda. In doing so, they should work with organisations to enable accountability, which should: encourage, protect and responsabilise individual members; support individual or local whistle-blowing practices, which should be encouraged; and enable local struggles for legitimacy.

We would also expect representatives of the professional associations of HRM practitioners, which is the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development (CIPD) in the UK, to take an active role in setting the agenda. In the UK, many EDI professionals are members of the CIPD. In a similar manner to ‘traditional’ professions, such as law, accounting and medicine, which are enabled by complex regulatory contexts that are both informed by and policing of the values of the profession (see Abbott, 1988), mandatory reporting and EDI incentive systems could enable the emergence of a new professional ethic for the HR profession, based on the creation of new forms of value that emanate from organisational forms that increase equality while also increasing aggregated goods. Indeed, EDI practitioners should be uniquely positioned to leverage the new context to benefit their employers, as well as to give feedback to policymakers about the value of specific interventions. As Kalev et al. (2006: 592) argue ‘[i]f diversity efforts are everyone’s responsibility but no one’s primary responsibility, they are more likely to be decoupled’. As a consequence, it is important to empower EDI practitioners within the HRM profession, and to consider their potential in extending responsabilisation across employment systems.

Finally, we can also expect some positive productivity-based consequences from a responsabilising policy agenda. In doing so, we acknowledge evidence demonstrating that regulation often plays a vital role in facilitating better people management practices (Doellgast and Marsden, 2018). Our argument rests on the premise that regulating to increase organisational transparency can stimulate more EDI-aware forms of organisational development and weed-out discriminatory management practices, because a range of stakeholders can better see the consequences of organisational practices that disadvantage people (see also Doorey, 2011). Coupled with this, regulations that foster cooperation across supply chains can result in a more stable pattern of demand, resulting in competitive contexts that enable more stable employment patterns, reducing the precarity of workers (see Thomas and Turnbull, 2017). This can be expected to result in a wide range of organisational benefits, such as business sustainability (Perrini and Tencati, 2006), as well as more ethical approaches to HRM (see Bratton et al., 2022).

## Discussion and conclusion

This article extends a Bourdieusian social critique to argue that neoliberal forms of equality regulation are ultimately counterproductive. They tend to push responsibility for reducing inequalities to the individual level, and this can be divisive. Furthermore, there is currently a lack of incentives for employers to increase their own, or their regulators', responsibilities, and so a system of regulation that responsabilises social formations needs to be creatively imagined. In this regard, we posit that attention to the symbolic dimensions of class relations and using a sociological imagination informed by a realist mode of enquiry may create a vantage point for research aimed at impelling more responsabilised forms of regulation.

Though we do not want to devalue the importance of profitability or sustainability, systems of equality indexes and other incentive structures (Chapman et al., 2023), which we started to outline above, would serve to start responsabilising employers. Equality metrics can be used to create market signals that enable customers, consumers and potential employees to make ethical choices. In these circumstances, we argue the possibilities for EDI interventions to increase the porosity of social class boundaries in workplaces would be enhanced, as there would be clear incentives for doing so. In short, contextual changes that responsabilise organisations, rather than individuals, should enable EDI practitioners to make a difference.

This provocation implies that workplaces should seek to identify their dominant EDI ethos, how this ethos welcomes or rejects, values or undermines people from an atypical demographic background. In this process, EDI interventions should capture pathways through which individuals from different socio-demographic positions could be recruited, retained and developed in the same context without fear of discrimination, exclusion and symbolic devaluation. The outcome would be a novel form of social economy – an EDI-aware form of social democracy – that actively enables those disadvantaged by their own subjective and objective positioning in social relations, by creating novel access routes to opportunities and resources: an economy that is more generally enabling. Extending work on effective regulation of EDI in the workplace (such as Özbilgin and Tatli, 2011; Tatli and Özbilgin, 2012; Wrench, 2005), we posit that such regulation would benefit from relational responsabilisation, which bridges the socio-legal responsibility with individual responsabilisation, through effective responsabilisation of institutional actors, such as employers, trade unions, professional bodies and diversity networks.

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## ORCID iDs

Steve Vincent  <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-9582-3963>

Ana Lopes  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-7012-9526>

Elina Meliou  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-8912-3378>

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Steve Vincent is Professor of Work and Organisation at Newcastle University Business School, Newcastle, UK. His research covers a wide range of work and employment issues, and it is typically written using combinations of critical realist, labour process, political economy and Bourdieusian perspectives. He has edited various books and special issues of peer-review journals, and he has authored and co-authored more than 30 book chapters and peer-review journal articles.

Ana Lopes is Senior Lecturer in Work and Employment at Newcastle University Business School, Newcastle, UK. She has researched and written on diversity, precarity and employment relations. She is a board member of the European Sociological Association’s Research Network 14 – Gender Relations in the Labour Market and the Welfare State.

Elina Meliou is Professor of Work and Organisation Studies at Brunel Business School, London, UK. Her research focuses on examining the experiences and negotiations of work, particularly as it pertains to women and minorities in precarious situations. She has a track record of publications

in prestigious academic journals, including *Human Relations*, *Journal of Management Studies*, *Work, Employment and Society* and *Gender, Work and Organization*. Her co-edited book titled 'Diversity and Precarious Work During Socio-Economic Upheaval' will be released by Cambridge University Press in December 2023.

Mustafa F Özbilgin is Professor of Organisational Behaviour at Brunel Business School, London, UK. His research focuses on equality, diversity and inclusion at work from comparative and relational perspectives. He has conducted field studies in the UK and internationally, and his work is empirically grounded. International as well as national scientific bodies support his research. His work has a focus on changing policy and practice in equality and diversity at work. He is an engaged scholar, driven by the values of workplace democracy, equality for all and humanisation of work.

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