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Diversity and the Evaluation of Talent in the Accounting Profession: The Enigma of Merit

ABSTRACT

Whilst accounting firms are facing recruitment and retention problems, regulatory bodies are calling for efforts to improve diversity to be more effective, especially at senior levels. In this paper we discuss “merit” and assumptions about “meritocracy” in processes of performance evaluation and career progression. Based upon interviews in medium and large professional services firms in the UK, we explore how the language/practices of “merit” can inhibit moves to improving diversity. “Merit” has two aspects: ‘technical’ notions of core competencies associated with “merit”, but also cultural notions of social fit, which have the effect of favouring the progression of the elite groups embedded within firms. The latter creates a loop in understanding merit, enacted within firm culture over time, that is difficult to disrupt. As such, efforts to improve diversity are unlikely to bring about change without considering how organizational beliefs about merit have unintended consequences.

I. SYNOPSIS AND CONTRIBUTIONS TO PRACTICE

“The relentless emphasis on creating a fair meritocracy, in which social positions reflect effort and talent, has a corrosive effect on the way we interpret our success (or the lack of it.” (Sandel, 2020, 25).

“What do you actually value? Do you actually understand the benefits that diversity can bring in the long term or are we just going to remain in this little loop?” (R41, partner, ex-Big 4 firm).

The two quotes above signal how ideas about merit may appear ‘rational’ and taken-for-granted but can be exclusionary, particularly for individuals in under-represented groups. In this paper we explore how merit is understood in accounting firms and the effects such interpretations have upon efforts to improve diversity.

The Diversity, Equity and Inclusion (DEI) agenda matters to firms. It matters in a regulatory sense: equality legislation, in countries such as the UK, US, and Canada, requires organisations to address workplace discrimination.¹ Moreover, firms make sense of diversity as more than

¹ For example, the Equality Act 20/21 in the US, Equality Act 2010 in the UK, Canadian Human Rights Act 1985 and federal gender equality laws.

merely a legal obligation: implementing DEI policies is seen as the right thing to do, both ethically and commercially ('the business case for diversity'; cf. Edgley, Sharma and Anderson-Gough, 2016; Edgley, Sharma, Anderson-Gough and Robson, 2017).

In accounting, professional bodies and firms now collect, report, and manage diversity 'statistics' on demographic characteristics of their workforce (see for example American Institute of Certified Public Accountants (AICPA), 2021; Financial Reporting Council (FRC), 2022).² While some progress is being made, outcomes across different aspects of diversity (including ethnicity, sexuality, and disability, as well as gender) have been mixed, especially at senior levels (Duff and Ferguson, 2011; Annisette and Trivedi, 2013; Ghio, Moulang and Gendron, 2022; Ghio, McGuigan and Powell, 2023; Egan and Voss, 2022).

In short, efforts to move the needle in improving diversity across *all* social groupings have shown limited results. Consequently, firms are facing calls from regulatory bodies and social movements to do more, and faster (Fernandes, 2021; Financial Times, 2022). This challenge is exacerbated by intense competition in recruiting diverse talent and retaining staff (Lazanis, 2021; ICAEW, 2022; Thomson Reuters, 2022;).

Crucially then, our study explores a key aspect of why the pace of change in improving diversity has been protracted, linked to how individuals feel valued, and this has further implications for recruitment and retention. We analyse how understandings of 'merit' in the language and practices of firms, are complex and multi-faceted (where "merit" comprises both technical competencies but also cultural notions of social fit and deservingness of promotion). The facet we focus on, is how ideas about merit and deservingness together, can be narrow, *self-referential*, and thus reproduce inequality over time, both by shaping how trainees are judged in the image of their peers, but also how trainees come to think of themselves as being people of merit (Markovits, 2019; Castilla and Ranganathan, 2020; Sandel 2020).

To explore *how* ideas about merit become exclusionary in practice, we analyse interview data. The interviews were conducted in the UK, but the data have international relevance. Our findings demonstrate how latent beliefs about merit are often hidden in everyday language and

² Such data only provide a partial view. As an example, while 39% of partners in the US may be female (AICPA, 2021), information about the impact of having more than one diversity characteristic is limited.

practices, and historical norms concerning ‘social fit’.

Our contributions to practice lie in providing insights into how informal and tacit understandings of merit underpin every day work practices, wherein unconscious biases may reside. Those who do succeed routinely consider that this was purely on their ‘own’ merit rather than forgetting the good fortune, cultural advantages and the support of the firm elites that helped them on their way, (“meritocratic hubris”, Sandel, 2020). Practices that allocate work in selective ways over time, combined with learned behaviours within firm culture (referred to as “socialisation” in the academic literature) and tacit assumptions about merit in evaluation and promotion practices can create a narrow ‘loop’ that values and favours the career progression of certain elite groups.

We are not suggesting that understandings of merit need to be redefined in a prescriptive way, but it is crucial to reflect on how narrow beliefs can provide both positive and negative cues. We develop recommendations about opening up discussion around broader understandings of merit. Combined with this, reflection is needed about fairer work allocation processes that discourage a form of favouritism, sustained over time, among those involved in more prestigious work, that tends to disadvantage under-represented groups. Broadening ideas about merit, in turn, influences everyday work behaviours and how individuals come to understand their own value. Linking broader ideas about merit to evaluation and promotion criteria has the potential to speed up the career progression of under-represented groups, with positive implications for recruitment and retention. Otherwise, ongoing efforts to improve diversity are unlikely to be game-changing while cultural barriers, contrary to the ideals of diversity programmes, remain embedded in everyday work practices.

II. BACKGROUND

Prior studies have observed how learned behaviours (socialisation) about career success, merit and cultural fit are associated with exclusionary, masculine ways of working, referred to as ‘homo-sociality.’³ Such expectations have been observed across large accountancy firms internationally (Anderson-Gough et al. 1998a, 1998b; Spence, Dambrin, Carter, Husillos and

³ Expectations regarding cultural fit have long been characterised as masculine ways of working (Grey, 1998; Anderson-Gough et al. 1998b, 2005; Edgley et al. 2016; Bitbol-Saba and Dambrin, 2019) including a commitment to long-working hours, out of hours work related socialising, being attentive to client needs in priority to one’s personal life, dress-code, certain types of ‘networking’, the so-called “work hard, play hard” culture, and the jokes/banter that are seen as fun.

Archel, 2015). Rivera (2012) found that professional services firms recruit people likely to ‘fit’ in with the *current* staff profile and culture. Moreover, this preference for perceiving merit as a characteristic of current partners and senior managers becomes embedded into employees’ experiences throughout their career, as their training and socialisation in the job proceeds. Certain individuals perceive themselves, and are perceived, as more deserving promotion than others because they ‘fit in’ within firm culture and have been provided with opportunities and encouraged to apply for promotion. (Sommerlad, 2015; Simpson, Kumra, Lewis, and Rumens, 2019; Sandel, 2020).

Career success at partnership levels thus builds self-referential assumptions around how ‘potential’ is identified early on and can also be associated with certain elite schools and clubs from whence the current firm elite emerged (Spence et al. 2015; Anderson-Gough et al. 1998a; DeLong, Gabarro and Lees, 2007; Kornberger, Justesen and Mouritsen, 2011). Sommerlad’s work (2015) has called this the “social magic of merit.” Consequently, junior staff can experience the promotion process as a ‘black box,’ beyond the well-established technical criteria of professional qualification, working long hours and completing jobs under budget (Anderson-Gough et al. 2022).

Firms are increasingly aware of the need to eliminate workplace discrimination and unconscious bias. However, it can be challenging for practitioners to make sense of how and where efforts should be focused, especially when the diversity agenda is continually changing and evolving (Edgley et al. 2016). We suggest that the outcome of diversity policies will continue to be stymied, unless consideration is given to how and where narrow ideas about merit in the workplace can operate as an exclusion barrier.

III. RESEARCH DESIGN AND APPROACH

To explore *how* ideas about merit become exclusionary, our paper draws on data from 56 interviews across the UK, carried out between 2014 and 2023. The duration of each interview ranged from 50 mins to 1.5 hours. Interviewees spanned across Big 4, large, mid-tier and small firms with accounting professionals at various stages of their careers and we also interviewed representatives from NGOs and accounting professional bodies. We interviewed individuals from social groups representing all legally protected diversity characteristics and interviewees with non-visible disabilities, including neuro-divergence. (See Table 1 for interviewee details).

Additionally, we ran 6 focus group discussions with a range of individuals at various levels of seniority and experience (with an average of six individuals in each group) (See Table 2).

Questions were asked to explore how DEI policies and practices were developing, and influencing everyday behaviours at work, training, recruitment, professional networking, career progression and promotion practices. We also conducted an analysis of Big 4 firm websites, primarily of themes relating to discussions about merit in the context of diversity, to ensure that data gathered were sufficiently broad.

We used NVivo 11 to analyse our data and adopt a thorough approach in our methods. Themes were derived from scholarship but also emerged from our close reading of interview data and text analysis. All four authors were involved in the analysis of the data exploring how beliefs about merit can become a loop. Themes that emerged from our analysis, included observations on stereotyping around individuals who are seen to fit in within firm culture, work allocation processes, observations on luck in career progression, and beliefs about the impact of socialisation processes over time.

We noticed how socialisation processes have nuanced impacts on career progression over time, starting with allocation of work from the outset of a career, how the impacts of socialisation are cumulative in speeding up or slowing down career progression and finally, how this affects promotion experiences at crucial moments in time, especially at senior levels. We thus set our findings to reflect these temporal aspects under three headings: 1) how everyday work allocation practices can be imbued with taken for granted ideas about merit 2) how socialisation processes produce and reproduce bias in beliefs about talent and competences over time, and 3) the influence of beliefs about merit in evaluation and promotion practices.

IV. FINDINGS: UNDERSTANDINGS OF MERIT AND RELEVANCE FOR DIVERSITY, EQUITY AND INCLUSION

Since conducting our first stage of interviews, understandings of DEI have continued to develop, but little has altered within conversations that focus on merit⁴ apart from a few

⁴ Grey highlighted the importance of further exploring the rhetoric of merit as early as 1998 (Grey, 1998).

references on Big 4 firm websites to emerging research.⁵ In the following sections we analyse how beliefs about merit operate as an ongoing exclusion barrier over the course of time. We start by considering how processes of work allocation (that is, how audit teams may be assembled by senior managers and partners) can contribute to constructions of merit. We then suggest that these understandings of merit come to be reinforced in everyday behaviours and may be exclusionary to those with diversity characteristics. Finally, we highlight how narrow ideas of merit remain unchallenged by evaluation and promotion criteria and practices.

Effects of Work Allocation Processes on Perceptions of Merit

Passing professional examinations and performing well on in-house training courses, are fundamental to qualification and career advancement. Accordingly, demonstrating technical proficiency is of course one of the ways in which trainees can be said to have ‘merit’. Seen in these terms, almost all trainees and early qualified are considered to have ‘technical’ merit, in terms of their audit competencies and knowledge and are regularly evaluated on their work (what we refer to as formal ideas about merit).

However, audit trainees can acquire and be judged to have merit in ways that link to the types of ‘jobs’ they were assigned to work upon and the prestige of the clients that they therefore service. For example, interviewees at (ex-Big 4 firm) partner level noted that work allocations and assigning individuals to clients often reflect choices among senior staff about who they “prefer” to work with, leading to the problem of ‘homo-sociality’ (Anderson-Gough et al. 1998a; Rivera, 2012). Such patterns over time, informally and tacitly, shape understandings of who has merit, and therefore potential. Having good fortune at an early stage, and subsequently continuing to work with the same audit teams that are employed on more prestigious (“listed”) clients or projects, can work to advance careers.

“It gets to a point where partners, especially older partners that have been there for a long time, they will say, well, I have a new project, I want this person and this person and this person. You say ‘but they’re not the best.’ ‘Don’t care, I want this person, this person’... it’s not transparent to the team but lots of partners choose their teams on a consistent basis.” (R53, partner, ex-Big 4 firm).

⁵ For example, Deloitte Australia (2019) refer to the work of Castilla (2016) on paradoxes of meritocracy reinforcing bias. <https://www2.deloitte.com/au/en/blog/diversity-inclusion-blog/2019/meritocracy-unraveling-paradox.html>

This building of a social relationship with a group of partners and managers, who become sponsors for an individual's career progression, becomes a cue that an individual fits in with the firm. Yet, as the partner quoted above noted, this selectivity is often more about familiarity, 'rapport', convenience and fitting in, rather than technical ability. Working with more high-profile clients bolsters the business case for promotion. Good job evaluations and ratings for such employees can then be a self-fulfilling prophecy. Over time this 'favouritism in work distribution,' which might be justified in the name of the client (Anderson-Gough et al. 2000), becomes a form of exclusion and contributes to a promotion pipeline problem:

“The boys got all the good audits because of that sort of conscious/unconscious bias, pick which one you believe - the FTSE, getting listed audit clients is the way that you make your career, so your career starts going like that and your pay...whilst the women... were given the private clients or the easier clients or the less high-profile clients...that's what clients want.” (R41, partner, ex-Big 4 firm).

This legacy of early stage choices in client work allocation over time, even for individuals from underrepresented groups who are promoted to partner, constructs the assumptions that some employees have the right kind of merit. This is apparent in pay disparities:

“So, I did a study, because I got so sick of it, in gender pay gap in the partnership because it was just ridiculous. I mean the graph was beautiful, we were saying well, why is there a big gender pay gap here ... you had to work it all the way back to ...the beginning of these people's careers.” (R53, partner, ex-Big 4 firm).

Work allocation processes in firms may be starting to recognise this problem and there is some change: we were informed of initiatives in tax (R54, tax manager, Big 4 firm). Certain areas of more routine technical work may be open to requests, although on a first to respond basis.

Relatedly, we also noted a problem in that, however well intended, certain diversity initiatives, such as 'flexible working' may also lead to the allocation of work in a way that disadvantages an individual. This is referred to as the “*downward slope*,” (R41, partner, ex-Big 4 firm): for example, on returning from maternity leave, being allocated office roles or less prestigious audit clients.

Socialisation Processes Reproducing Beliefs About Merit Over Time

The everyday behaviours and assumptions about merit and ‘fitting in’ that they embody reproduce narrow beliefs about competencies over time among accounting trainees and the newly qualified. This *socialization* into the norms of the behaviours of the firm’s elites in turn influences how individuals make sense of their own value, professional identity and that of their colleagues, as their careers progress. For example, while age is a protected diversity characteristic, demonstrating partnership potential early in a career is seen as important. Prevailing norms about appropriate age thresholds for promotion were ubiquitous, and this is recognised in practitioner journals as a matter of concern to those with partnership ambitions in mid-career (Accountingweb, 2013). As one ex-partner told us, she sponsored a colleague for promotion who was beyond a particular age cut-off point:

“So, he was always here as director, he brought in £xx million, seven years in a row, every year, right, I'm not joking because we look at the numbers, right, amazing guy, right, 53 so age also becomes a problem. He didn't make partner by 40 ...you can't... you're done with here, right?” (R41, partner, ex-Big 4 firm).

A female Director with a medium sized firm told us, she knew that she ‘ticked’ all the formal benchmarks for promotion but had been told continually there was something missing in her application but without any explanation. She was conscious about her age in being repeatedly overlooked for promotion (R20, director, large firm).

A few of our interviewees also expressed concern about how their disability might be perceived and the potential impact for ‘fitting in’ to firm culture. We were told by one interviewee that she was moved to a non-client facing role as a progressively serious physical disability became more noticeable (R3, senior manager, retired, Big 4 firm). Two other interviewees, at the start of their careers, were anxious about voluntarily disclosing non-visible disabilities lest this affected how they were valued. An individual on the autism spectrum told us:

“I think that's one of the barriers to me. My view of accounting is that it's not flexible. As someone with a disability that was something that really worried me, and still worries me.” (R55, trainee, Big 4 firm).

Similarly, another trainee (R56, medium firm) was explicitly advised by managers not to disclose her non-visible disability, as such things can create unconscious bias about competencies. In contrast to the ‘bring your whole self to work’ diversity rhetoric espoused on firm websites (Edgley et al. 2016), many of our interviewees believed that such openness about diversity characteristics could impact negatively on the business case for promotion.

We often heard mention of how the work environment could encourage a form of “banter” or teasing between ‘in’ and ‘out’ groups expressing ‘joking’ intolerance of nuanced aspects of difference. While the topics of banter can be trivial, we were given examples of how early career colleagues could be teased: for having an interest in crafts such as jam making; or a younger male ridiculed for wearing a cardigan in the workplace (considered, in that context, to be a feminine craft/garment); or taunting fasting colleagues during Ramadan for practicing religious beliefs at work, (R24 and R14, audit seniors, large firm). Repeated teasing, can feel relentless to those who are the objects of such ‘banter’:

“Because there is not a big event but there was a small event every single day which destroys your life. a lot of the stuff in these sorts of organisations is hierarchical learnt behaviour and people look and see and that they behave accordingly.” (R41, partner, ex-Big 4 firm).

Such *socialising* processes in firms reproduce norms about acceptable workplace behaviours and gradually influence assumptions about individual worth. While some individuals respond to these cues and thus demonstrate promotion potential and being part of an ‘in group’, others who are concerned that they do not fit in, experience feelings that they are valued less. This extends to thinking differently about work tasks. As one Director informed us, (R6, Big 4 firm) she had observed a female colleague being humiliated in public for questioning the relevance of an audit task where typically one does not question a programme of work. Over time, these types of beliefs about who gets on, and ideal ways of working become reinforced and can influence how individuals assess their own value, and decisions whether to stay with a firm or not.

Evaluation and promotion practices: reinforcing ideas about merit

It is in evaluation processes where the tension between diversity and the language of merit is most apparent. Formal assessments about performance, and the business case for promotion

can appear to be neutral, and evidence based, but still value and favour, for example, gender bias. For example, one diversity champion told us she was involved in discussions around bonus allocations when a representative from HR queried why women were being valued less and paid 10% less than the men for the same grading, for the same work:

“And we hadn't noticed it...it comes back to what is valued, what keeps those barriers up, what sort of behaviour, what sort of type of person works in this sort of work hard/play hard macho type thing? Men. What do we value? Men or those sorts of attributes...we completely underestimated how much that permeates.” (R53, partner, ex-Big 4 firm).

This quote emphasises how evaluators recognise the imperative to treat individuals fairly, but latent beliefs can lead to a privileging of masculine attributes, as being more deserving.

In turn, taken for granted beliefs about merit, are seen as “winning behaviours.” Applying for promotion requires more than demonstrating technical merit, but is also associated with presenting a compelling business case:

“One of our female partners said that when she went for her Partner Promotion Panel, she told them what she thought they'd want to hear in terms of how she won the business that she won. She put it in quite a 'male' way...and I think she exaggerated it and made [herself] sound a bit more masculine and aggressive because that's what she thought they'd want to hear.” (R2, partner, large firm).

Individuals feel more confident about applying for promotion early, especially if they have the support of a senior sponsor. Others in marginalised social groupings may be more cautious in wanting to be sure that they are ready. Hesitancy can thus slow down career progression, contributing to pay gaps in the longer term:

“Whereas external hires from different cultural backgrounds don't do it (apply for promotion) unless they're absolutely sure they'll get it.” (R46, HR manager, Big 4 firm).

Whilst diversity targeted mentoring efforts within firms have attempted to address some of these issues (Dobbin and Kalev, 2016; Edgley et al. 2016; Lupu, Spence and Empson, 2018),

learned understandings about merit over time remain influential.

Finally, in our interviews, discussions about the idea of using targets or soft quotas to improve diversity at senior levels were frequently met with anxiety. Interestingly, there has been much debate recently about the role of quotas and positive discrimination as a quick remedy. While some countries such as Norway have introduced gender quotas, in others including the UK, positive discrimination is illegal (and by implication, quotas that require affirmative action to fill). The US Supreme Court has also recently declared affirmative policies to be unconstitutional, with wider implications for DEI in the workplace (The Guardian, 2023).

Some individuals expressed concern about the idea of even soft targets and appearing to be promoted for their diversity rather than merit. This worry about the scrutiny of others querying the grounds for their promotion, and attributing this to diversity characteristics, was perhaps not unfounded. In our interviews an early career male (R12, senior associate, Big 4 firm) alluded to the aforementioned ‘bantering,’ coupled with irritation among male colleagues in one UK region who felt they were being promoted less quickly than women. An office or a department with greater diverse representation at senior levels, may experience soft forms of resistance and concerns about displacement among others who believe they exhibit winning behaviours.

Although changes are beginning to take place in formal aspects of evaluation processes to eliminate discrimination (such as establishing diverse promotion panels and reviewing outcomes), our interviews highlight how merit continues to carry social and cultural norms that is in tension with the ideals of diversity that firms continue to espouse.

V. IMPLICATIONS

While efforts to improve diversity are making a difference, regulators and firm stakeholders are calling for firms to do more and faster (AICPA, 2021; FRC, 2019, 2022). Our findings suggest that efforts will continue to be frustrated while understandings of merit are not subject to critical reflection. Our paper shows how the language (and thus the practice) of merit, is a complex concept, with related assumptions about both technical proficiency and more tacit ideas of worth (Anderson-Gough et al. 2022). Socialisation processes mirror the cultural contexts in which they are embedded about what, and who, is valued, creating circular

processes that can be difficult to reform. So, whilst diversity champions can play a pivotal role in changing firm culture, if those key individuals leave, progress may be halting: “*lots of them told me now that I left ... it was not inclusive, they (her former team) didn't feel they belonged.*” (R41, partner, ex-Big 4 firm).

Our findings that understandings about merit affect individuals from the beginning of a career have significant unintended consequences, with important policy implications for practitioners, professional bodies, HR experts, regulatory bodies, potential trainees and firm stakeholders. We are not suggesting that merit should be redefined in a prescriptive way. The concept by default becomes self-referential however it is conceptualised. However, more reflection is needed on understanding *how* beliefs about merit can provide both positive and negative cues. Efforts to improve diversity also require reflection on how the temporal effects of everyday behaviours and socialisation processes over the course of a career can be exclusionary for those with diversity characteristics, and those who do not have the good fortune of seeming to fit in early on in a career.

Our findings resonate with current discussions around “meritocratic hubris” (Sandel, 2020), and how beliefs about professional meritocracy allow individuals to unquestioningly assume that promotion is based on their own merit rather than arising from privilege over time. In our work, a further nuance here is the tension between formal and informal beliefs about merit. Diversity aware individuals know that formal promotion processes should be evidence based but can still reinforce the status quo when evaluating individuals because of entrenched beliefs about deservingness. See Figure 1, which outlines how understandings of success within organisations perpetuate the merit loop.

Addressing a lack of diversity in promotion pipelines is not easy to remedy. The diversity agenda is unlikely to be a *fait accompli* but rather an ongoing endeavour to enhance representation and inclusion in organisations (Risberg and Corvellec, 2022). Our study provides meaningful insights with *global* relevance, into why progress on improving diversity is not faster. This is all the more important, as the impact of the pandemic appears to have negatively affected the career progression of underrepresented groups, especially women (Ozkazanc-Pan and Pullen, 2021; Ghio, Moulang and Gendron, 2022).

Our recommendations are to suggest that if work allocation practices were more openly

discussed, this might discourage a form of unspoken social preferencing that brings a privilege contrary to the ideals and objectives of diversity and inclusiveness programmes. This is linked to ideas about recognising and valuing broader contributions to organisational success (Painter-Moorland, 2019) that can help to address challenges in staff retention. Furthermore, broadening ideas about a mix of skills, profiles and personalities that are valued, and rethinking processes of evaluation may also help with recruitment, and integrating diversity initiatives that result in more long-lasting change. This will also address misunderstandings where an absence of diverse talent in promotion pipelines is presented as an issue, rather than exploring why this lack of diversity arises (Sommerlad, 2015).

New ideas about implementing diversity are thus unlikely to be game-changing, while cultural barriers to change remain embedded in everyday work practices. Diversity policies have greater potential for impact if they are more systematically linked to processes of evaluation. To disrupt the merit loop requires ongoing reflection on how, where and why certain individuals may have benefitted from more good fortune than others. This calls for a more nuanced understanding of equity, so that individuals throughout their career are afforded the possibility of reaching the same level of success as others.

Ethical Clearance

This project has received research ethics approval from the Research Office – Chair of The Research Ethics Committee at the corresponding author's university. Evidence is available on request.

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