



Don't Rock the Boat: The Social-symbolic Work to Confront Ethnic Discrimination in Branches of Professional Service Firms

Daniela Aliberti¹ · Rita Bissola¹ · Barbara Imperatori¹

Received: 7 January 2022 / Accepted: 5 January 2024
© The Author(s) 2024

Abstract

In Western societies and organizations, episodes of discrimination based on individual demographic and social characteristics still occur. Relevant questions, such as why ethnic discrimination is perpetuated and how people confront it in the workplace, remain open. In this study, we adopt a social-symbolic work perspective to explore how individuals confront workplace ethnic discrimination by both upholding and challenging it. In doing so, we incorporate the perspectives of those directly experiencing, observing and neglecting discrimination. Specifically, we focus on the Italian branches of North American professional service firms (PSFs), performing a qualitative investigation of the worlds of concern among professionals regarding the topic of ethnic discrimination to explore how different backgrounds motivate social-symbolic work. We find that different forms of work are enacted to support the status quo, shape the boundaries of existing organizational practices, and balance professional identities, emotions, and careers to silence episodes of ethnic discrimination. We also highlight cases of 'soft,' yet increasing, work that contests the status quo. Finally, we discuss our results in light of neo-institutional and critical management research to ultimately inspire our focal firms and societies to find alternatives to the rhetoric in the established approaches to inequality.

Keywords Ethnic discrimination · Diversity and inclusion · Social-symbolic work · Systemic inequality · Worlds of concern

Introduction

Even as our societies and organizations rhetorically commit to fighting inequality, we can still observe episodes of discrimination based on a variety of individual demographic and social characteristics (Pew Research Center, 2021, 2023). In particular, since the murder of George Floyd, the new motto of some Western firms reflects a commitment to ending racism (Kramer, 2020). These efforts have been particularly visible in North American firms operating worldwide, which have been 'exporting' their approach to

diversity and inclusion to other countries, such as European ones. However, this situation is problematic because Europe and North America have distinct and distant approaches to addressing discrimination. While racism is a very delicate matter for both, Europe is experimenting, due to political instability and globalization, an increase in flows of people; meanwhile, European countries, amid state coercion and anti-immigrant hostility, follow the supranational guidelines of the European Union and national laws and integration methods (e.g., Barker, 2012; Farkas, 2017).

This discussion considers that organizational discrimination based on ethnicity is maintained through 'systems of inequality' (e.g., Benschop, 2021). In this respect, questions such as *why* discrimination is perpetuated and *how* people address it often remain unanswered, although such inquiries are particularly relevant for large corporations operating across different countries.

Business ethics and management scholars have viewed ethnic discrimination as an organizational and societal issue in Western countries (e.g., Cornelius et al., 2010; Muzanenhamo & Chowdhury, 2022) from different

✉ Daniela Aliberti
daniela.aliberti@unicatt.it

Rita Bissola
rita.bissola@unicatt.it

Barbara Imperatori
barbara.imperatori@unicatt.it

¹ Department of Economics and Business Management Sciences, Università Cattolica del Sacro Cuore, Via Necchi, 7, Milan, Italy

perspectives. If we pair the neo-institutional view of systemic inequality with critical management studies, presenting organizations with ‘grand challenges’ (e.g., Amis et al., 2018, 2020; Willmott, 2015; Zanoni & Janssens, 2015), we observe that the extant theoretical and empirical efforts follow the same direction: dismantling systems of inequality and providing individuals, organizations and societies with alternatives that *truly* address discrimination. One way to embrace this broad aim is to employ the social-symbolic work perspective to observe how the actions of individuals contribute to preserving and/or altering the abovementioned systems (Lawrence & Phillips, 2019) and how individuals develop their sensibility and awareness on the topic of ethnic discrimination (Creed et al., 2022).

Thus, in this study, we ask the following question: *How do personal experiences and sensibilities motivate individuals to act to challenge or uphold ethnic discrimination and racism within their organizations?* To address this overarching question, we adopt the view advanced by Lawrence and Phillips (2019) on ‘social-symbolic work’ (the set of directed efforts of individuals to change the social world around them), introducing the interplay of this perspective with the notion of ‘worlds of concern’ (the set of experiences, perceptions and related awareness of individuals’ social surroundings) (Creed et al., 2022) in confronting the social issue of workplace inequality (Amis et al., 2020). We have chosen the context of Italian branches of North American Professional Service Firms (PSFs) because they constitute a highly representative example of the ‘business case’ of diversity and inclusion (Litvin, 2006) and its significant limitations (Boussebaa, 2024). In addition, these Italian branches symbolize local institutional realities (Amis et al., 2018) that are characterized by practices ‘imported’ from North America (Muzio & Faulconbridge, 2013). Hence, this Italian case allows us to observe workplace ethnic discrimination in the framework of disjointed and developmental policies for integration (e.g., Tarabusi, 2022).

Our findings present a sad, but slightly promising, scenario. We identify four main forms of social-symbolic work—which we label ‘soft contesting,’ ‘balancing,’ ‘reshaping’ and ‘justification’ work—whereby professionals sustain the status quo while quietly attempting to contest it. We are therefore able to understand the motivations, circumstances, and potential effects associated with these different endeavors during direct, witnessed, or neglected discrimination experiences. We discuss these findings with respect to the ongoing scholarly debate regarding systemic inequality, the role of ‘worlds of concern’ and the implications of different forms of work for individuals, organizations, and institutions (e.g., Amis et al., 2018, 2020; Benschop, 2021; Creed et al., 2022; Lawrence & Phillips, 2019).

Theoretical Background

A Systemic Socio-symbolical Perspective of Discrimination Based on Ethnicity in Organizations

In Western societies, multiple forms of discrimination toward non-Caucasian individuals are enacted in both evident and subtle ways (e.g., Ozturk & Berber, 2022). In organizations, some examples of ethnic discrimination include receiving lower performance ratings based on prejudice toward one’s competence (Hekman et al., 2017), workplace bullying and microaggressions (i.e., jokes and subtle offensive comments) (Sue, 2009), having one’s opinions often ignored or authority questioned, actual lower compensation, social exclusion, and less access to career opportunities (Noon, 2018). These episodes, with their motivations and consequences, are deemed part of the ‘systems of inequality’ rooted in the institutions in which organizations are embedded (e.g., Amis, et al., 2018, 2020; Benschop, 2021).

Research refers to institutions as the self-policing conventions, i.e., customs, practices, relationships, and behavioral patterns, which tend to be reinforced and replicated by individuals in a given community (Phillips et al., 2004). Thus far, they have been studied with a critical lens to uncover the motivations underlying racism and ethnic discrimination in organizations (e.g., Willmott, 2015). Some neo-institutionalism scholars, for instance, have advanced a perspective denoted ‘sociosymbolical’ to discuss social issues; specifically, they define ‘social-symbolic’ work as the ‘purposeful, reflexive efforts of individuals, collective actors, and networks of actors to shape social-symbolic objects’ (Lawrence & Phillips, 2019, p. 31); the latter are represented by any meaningful pattern in a social system, i.e., material (e.g., physical items), discursive (e.g., text, talk) or relational (e.g., social interaction).

The abovementioned research streams—both the critical and neo-institutionalist socio-symbolic one—converge on the idea that organizations should be examined ‘on the ground’ (Acker, 2012) to uncover how the processes, practices and behaviors of individuals allow the maintenance of inequality therein, making it difficult for individuals to change the status quo (Amis et al., 2018, 2020; Benschop, 2021). Institutions and organizations should, therefore, be discussed from the perspective of their microfoundations (e.g., Powell & Rerup, 2017), i.e., the perspective of individuals. The social-symbolic view, then, is particularly suited to uncovering the motivations, circumstances, and effects of the efforts of individuals to address ethnic discrimination; it allows us to address a social issue by contextually considering its individual, organizational and

institutional layers. In other words, we adopt the perspective of individuals, incorporating their self, organizational and institutional motivations and work, which is crucial for understanding how to address a systemic issue such as racism and discrimination based on people's ethnicity (Amis et al., 2018, 2020; Lawrence & Phillips, 2019).

Furthermore, self work specifically relates to what individuals do to "shape the social-symbolic dimension of the self" (Lawrence & Phillips, 2019, p. 64), thereby working on themselves and what surrounds them to cope with ethnic discrimination. Self work examples include migrant black women reacting to injustice by impersonating 'backstage roles' in the hotel industry, downplaying their true selves as a form of resistance to the experience of discrimination (Adib & Guerrier, 2003), as well as the experience of women in Arabic countries negotiating their identities based on expectations of being 'good women' in Islamic society while being successful female entrepreneurs (Tlaiss, 2015). Accordingly, some individuals work on their identities in reaction to experiences of discrimination based on ethnicity. Others enact various career strategies to avoid the negative effects associated with their ethnicity (Hoobler et al., 2010), such as 'whitening' a resumé (Kang et al., 2016) to make one's ethnicity less visible in the hiring process, constructing a 'fake' identity to avoid stigma, or using identity negotiation tactics to obtain benefits at work (Atewologun et al., 2016). The literature also highlights how some people work on their emotional reactions in the workplace, regulating them to always appear competitive and performance-oriented, despite developing status anxiety by adhering to 'élite identities,' i.e., behaving as although though they are 'among the best' (Alvesson & Robertson, 2006). Hence, individuals can perform actions involving their identities, careers, and emotions—all social-symbolic objects (Lawrence & Phillips, 2019)—to confront exclusion, association with ethnic biases and discriminatory behaviors. Consistent with this perspective, individuals can also perform organization and institutional work.

Organization work is defined as an action intended to construct and shape organizations, while institutional work is directly oriented toward creating, maintaining, or disrupting the institutions in which organizations are unavoidably embedded (e.g., Lawrence & Phillips, 2019). Thus, individuals can work on organizational practices to confront ethnic discrimination with the aim of shaping their boundaries while building, reinforcing and maintaining them as legitimate within a domain (e.g., Zietsma & Lawrence, 2010). They can also engage in work that contests and disrupts these practices (e.g., Maguire & Hardy, 2009), particularly vivid and oppressive ones (i.e., Nazi oppression and the Holocaust, dehumanization of immigrants moving to North America and Europe) (e.g., Martí & Fernández, 2013; McLaren, 2003). The literature indicates that when

individuals do not completely adhere to institutional arrangements, they perform small acts of resistance. These acts do not always represent forms of active contestation but can be more silent and informal personal strategies for coping with difficulties encountered in the workplace. These acts include hidden initiatives (i.e., illegal press), individuals' informal critiques (i.e., disapproving a supervisor in their absence) and silent drags (i.e., sabotaging a project) (e.g., Martí & Fernández, 2013). Another example concerns the diversity and inclusion practices (D&I¹) thought to perpetuate systems of inequality with specific reference to how they are designed and applied in organizational contexts to affirm distorted power dynamics (e.g., Zanoni & Janssens, 2015). Despite their declared objective, these practices are described as merely symbolic projects, based on aspirational speech and even hypocritical actions, which do not fruitfully prevent, fight, or confront discrimination; thus, they are often considered merely 'ceremonial' (e.g., Dobbin & Kalev, 2017). Recent studies have all highlighted how D&I practices can be not only ineffective (i.e., not achieving inclusion) but even cause false progress (i.e., not achieving any change) (Leslie, 2019), thereby contributing to the maintenance of inequality based on ethnicity. For instance, individuals react to the use of D&I categories to label members of their workforce on the basis of their ethnicity, as applied by organizations to define groups (e.g., Leslie, 2019), often perceiving them as discriminatory toward and diminishing of people's identities. Another example concerns how individuals perceive and react to rigid guidelines for their appearance and clothing in an organization, regardless of one's background or personality (e.g., Gill, 2015); often, they hide some personal characteristics to appear formal and aligned to organizational standards. Thus, neo-institutional research concludes that while some people perform small acts of resistance, others contribute to the reinforcement of systems of inequality for the sake of business (e.g., Amis et al., 2020).

As summarized above, then, it is more likely that the actions of individuals contribute to maintaining unaltered systems of inequality and that there are few attempts to resist the status quo (Amis et al., 2020; Benschop, 2021). This leads to two main considerations: First, we need to focus on the 'work' individuals engage in to intervene in the social

¹ Diversity and inclusion (D&I) represents the mainstream terminology used to refer to the set of organizational practices aimed at improving the workplace experiences and outcomes of 'minorities' in organizations (Hastings, 2009). More recent approaches invert the order of these two words to stress that the inclusion factor is more important than the recognition of diversity per se ('Inclusion and Diversity,' or I&D) (e.g., Shore et al., 2011); others also include the concept of equity in labeling these initiatives (e.g., Brennan, 2023). For consistency, we use 'D&I.'

world around them from the social-symbolic view of work, thereby contextually considering the individual, organizational and institutional layers; second, we need to explore the personal experiences of individuals that have helped them develop a certain understanding of ethnic discrimination, motivating them to perform social-symbolic work (Creed et al., 2022; Lawrence & Phillips, 2019).

The Interplay of Worlds of Concern and Social-symbolic Work in Confronting Ethnic Discrimination

Individuals can have very different backgrounds and experiences that motivate their capacity to recognize and evaluate episodes of discrimination and construct their own responses to it (Sayer, 2011). This is clear in the auto-ethnographical work of Picciolini (2017), where he reconstructs his experience as a white supremacist and motivations for abandoning this position to become an antiracism activist. Specifically, this work clarifies how one's actions in the present can be rooted in the sensemaking in one's past and reconsideration of the social world. This piece has inspired neo-institutional scholars to theorize the construct of embodied 'worlds of concern' (Creed et al., 2022), in which each sedimented experience, evaluation, commitment, and aspiration contributes to the construction of one's views of the world that are embedded in personal life experiences. These reflections can motivate the rise of renewed sensitivities and vulnerabilities to the topic of discrimination based on ethnicity and encourage different individual reactions. Consistently, such studies suggest examining the interplay of the worlds of concern with the 'work' of individuals to change the social world (Creed et al., 2022; Lawrence & Phillips, 2019). In this respect, some studies have suggested a link across the individual, organizational and institutional levels. For example, Leung et al. (2014) illustrate how housewives in Japan have worked on their identities to transform their roles (from wives to activists for gender equality) and how this has led to activism for the social cause of gender equality, with implications, at the institutional level, for wider Japanese society.

Overall, then, as Lawrence and Phillips (2019) claim, social-symbolic work is inspired and motivated by individuals' abilities, awareness, and availability of resources. Regarding discrimination based on ethnicity in organizations, to act on this issue, individuals can perform different forms of social-symbolic work depending on their past experiences (their mature consciousness of the topic), their roles in organizations (their ability to perform work based on the availability of resources) and their overall situatedness (in the national context and set of institutional rules characterizing a given field). Creed et al. (2022) have also suggested that different forms of work may reflect people's awareness, desires, and personal beliefs regarding inequality.

These authors argue that individuals can employ resources to 'bring themselves' to work and make a change. In addition, the literature tends to show that while most individuals 'believe' in 'the business case' and act to protect the status quo, others work to balance their true selves with what is expected from them via their emotions, identities, and careers. Hence, although few studies have attempted to bridge individual (or self) work with organizational and institutional implications, as suggested for analyzing how systemic inequality is maintained and can be addressed (Amis et al., 2018, 2020), we provide a complete picture of how ethnic discrimination is not only allowed but also perpetuated and how some forms of work may instead contribute to resisting the status quo.

Therefore, we pair the social-symbolic view of work with the notion of worlds of concern to uncover the forms of work individuals perform, i.e., how they react by maintaining or resisting discrimination based on ethnicity in organizations. Our research question is therefore constructed to specifically address these research gaps as follows: *How do worlds of concern motivate individuals to perform different forms of social-symbolic work to challenge or uphold ethnic discrimination and racism within their organizations?* In answering this question, we aim to illustrate the motivations whereby different forms of discrimination are encountered and the perspectives from which they are lived or observed (i.e., worlds of concern): the social-symbolic forms of work for challenging (resisting, reacting to) or upholding (maintaining, perpetuating) the social system around them, characterized by ethnic discrimination and inequality.

Methodology

Study Context and Levels of Analysis

To answer our research question, we have selected the context of the Italian branches of US PSFs. PSFs worldwide rely on an approach to D&I inspired by 'the business case' rooted in the Anglo-American tradition (Litvin, 2006) which carries and reproduces a neocolonial and West-centric approach to ethnicity and race (Boussebaa, 2024; Muzanhamo & Chowdhury, 2022). In addition, while PSFs are held in contempt for reiterating inequality by keeping their senior management white, heterosexual, middle-class and male (Sommerlad & Ashley, 2015), they employ highly educated individuals with diverse knowledge and sensitivities to social matters (Empson et al., 2015), an increasing tendency following the murder of George Floyd (Kramer, 2020). Thus, our focus on the experiences of PSF professionals is due to their roles, as 'agents of stability' over change (Furusten, 2009), and their adherence to 'élite identities'

(i.e., competitive, focused on work, highly qualified) (Alvesson & Robertson, 2006).

We have also selected the context of Italian PSF branches to explore the local realities that differ from those in the US to study inequality (Amis et al., 2020). While Italian PSF branches can be considered distant from the US model (Muzio & Faulconbridge, 2013), they represent the ideal setting for studying ethnic discrimination because Italy is characterized by a consolidated presence of diverse ethnic groups (e.g., Albanian, Turkish, sub-Saharan African, Iranian, Indian, Chinese) (e.g., Farkas, 2017) and a model of integration still 'in development,' allowing local realities to have a certain degree of autonomy in the implementation of integration policies (Tarabusi, 2022). Although Italy must respond to the integration policies of the EU, the integration of non-Caucasian individuals and non-Italians remains disjointed. Moreover, non-Caucasian professionals struggle to integrate in Italy (e.g., Bolzani et al., 2021; Murgia & Poggio, 2014), as illustrated in the small and medium-sized Italian firms (often clients of PSFs, as a relevant part of the Italian business fabric) that often still rely on local dialects in informal communication (e.g., Coluzzi, 2008).

Strategy of Inquiry, Data Structure and Analysis

Consistent with the social-symbolic view (Lawrence & Phillips, 2019), our data were collected at the individual level. We built the interview themes based on theoretical work on the discrimination and integration of ethnic groups in Italy (Farkas, 2017). Next, we were informed by social-symbolic work theory (Lawrence & Phillips, 2019). For each question, we thus asked the interviewees to relate their experiences inside and outside their firms to convey any discrimination based on ethnicity (Ozturk & Berber, 2022). In total, we conducted 36 interviews with professionals in three North American PSFs, employed across Italy and the rest of Europe.²

Table 1 summarizes the participants' key background information.

Our sample included members of different ethnic groups and nationalities employed across diverse levels and roles in the focal PSFs. Informed by the assumptions of social-symbolic work and the worlds of concern (Creed et al., 2022; Lawrence & Phillips, 2019), the sample included individuals possibly having an experience or a particular sensibility of discrimination based on ethnicity in the focal Italian

PSF branches. Therefore, we included members of ethnic 'minorities' in Italy and Caucasian D&I and HR professionals. Thus, amid the experiences of those potentially facing discrimination or difficulties in integrating into the Italian context due to their ethnic background, we also included Italian Caucasian professionals whose personal and working path signaled a particular sensibility to and awareness of the topic of discrimination (Shah & Corley, 2006).

We structured our interviews to identify the forms of work performed by individuals to confront the topic of discrimination. All participants were asked about the following topics³: their perceptions of how people from ethnic minorities feel and act in the workplace; their opinions concerning the D&I practices employed in their organization and the salient role thereof in wider society; their role(s) in the crafting and use of D&I practices; and their opinions concerning the meaning of integration compared to the extant approaches in the European Union.⁴

To build our sample, the data collection process involved a combination of purposive and snowball sampling (Patton, 2002). We contacted D&I practitioners and asked them to be interviewed and provide the contact information of colleagues from different ethnic groups. We also asked for the contact information of other people who might be interested in the project. Each of the 36 interviews lasted 45–75 min. All the interviews were digitally recorded, fully transcribed, and translated to English (when needed).

The process of the data analysis is summarized here. We started by independently performing repeated readings of the interview transcripts, ensuring that all dimensions of interest were considered (Tuckett, 2005). We first searched for evidence of the professionals' worlds of concern, referring to their backgrounds and experiences with ethnic discrimination. Thus, we reported each episode related to discrimination (individual experience of discrimination, difficulty integrating into Italian society, and 'disclosure' of discrimination). We classified these different experiences and discussed the emerging quotes and relationships among them to define a set of codes for the worlds of concern reported by these professionals. Next, we adopted the social-symbolic

² As Table 1 shows, the majority of our interviews were undertaken with people employed in the Italian branches of PSFs. We also interviewed D&I professionals working across Europe whose responsibilities include the management of D&I practices over Italy and other countries. Some of these professionals hold a previous working experience in Italian branches.

³ The different backgrounds of these individuals called for some adaptations in the interview questions. In particular, we built two sets of questions: one for the group of HR and D&I professionals (mostly Caucasian) and one for the members of non-Caucasian ethnic groups and non-Italian professionals. The only difference between these two texts consisted of, for the former, a question regarding the awareness of ethnic discrimination in the firm, and, for the latter, a question about their *lived* experiences of discrimination.

⁴ For this question, the participants were provided a list of approaches to integration, summaries of the models used in France, the UK, Germany, and Italy (the assimilationist, multicultural, functionalist, and Mediterranean models of integration of ethnic minorities, respectively) (Farkas, 2017).

Table 1 Background of the participants

N	Ethnic Group	Nation	Professional Role	Gen-der	Area of influence	Working experience	Other Relevant Information
1	Caucasian	English	D&I Associate Director	F	Europe, Global	Long-term working experience in the same PSFs	No international experience; focused on D&I
2	Caucasian	English	D&I Leader	F	Europe, Global	Long-term international working experience in PSFs	Married to a member of an ethnic 'minority' in the UK
3	Caucasian	French	D&I Leader	F	Europe	Long-term working experience in the same PSFs	No international experience
4	Caribbean	French	Senior Manager	M	France	Prior international working experience in other industries	Married to an Italian woman; speaks Italian; slight non-Italian sounding accent
5	Caucasian	English	Head of Legal	M	Europe, Global	Prior working experience in other industries in the UK	Background in law; No international experience
6	African	English	D&I Manager	M	Europe, Global	Prior working experience in other industries in the UK	No international experience
7	Caucasian	Italian	HR Business Partner	F	Italy and others	Long-term working experience in the same PSFs	No international experience
8	Caucasian	Italian	HR Talent Strategy Leader, D&I	F	Italy	Long-term international working experience in PSFs	Member of an Italian association promoting gender equality in business
9	Caucasian	Italian	HR Career Specialist	F	Italy	Prior working experience in other industries in Italy	No international experience
10	Caucasian	Italian	HR Career Specialist	F	Italy	Most working experience in PSFs in Italy	No international experience
11	Caucasian	Italian	HR Manager	F	Italy and others	Prior international working experience in other industries	–
12	African	Italian	Project Leader	F	Italy	Prior working international (i.e., Brazil) experience in other industries	Volunteer and activist for matters related to ethnicity
13	Caucasian	Italian	Project Leader	M	Italy	Prior working international (i.e., France) experience in other industries	Background in physics
14	Caucasian	Italian	HR Recruiting Dir	F	Italy and others	Prior experience as a psychologist; short-term experience in PSFs	Background in psychology; volunteering experience
15	Caucasian	Romanian	D&I Leader	F	Europe, Romania	Prior working experience in Romania	No international experience
16	Caucasian	Brazilian	Project Leader	M	Italy and others	Long-term working experience in PSFs	Italian origin; speaks Italian; slight non-Italian sounding accent
17	Indian	Indian	Partner	M	India, Global	Prior working international (i.e., the Netherlands) experience in other industries	–
18	South American	Bolivian	Manager	M	Italy	Most working experience in PSFs in Italy	Speaks Italian; slight non-Italian sounding accent

Table 1 (continued)

N	Ethnic Group	Nation	Professional Role	Gen-der	Area of influence	Working experience	Other Relevant Information
19	Caucasian	Italian	HR Director	F	Italy	Long-term international working experience in the same PSFs	–
20	Caucasian	Albanian	Legal Senior Man	F	Italy	Long-term working experience in PSFs in Italy	Background in law; speaks Italian; Italian sounding accent
21	Caucasian	Italian	HR Manager	F	Italy	Long-term working experience in PSFs in Italy	–
22	Indian	Indian	Project Manager	F	Italy	Prior working international experience in other industries	–
23	Caucasian	Italian	HR Senior Manager	M	Italy	Long-term working experience in the same PSFs in Italy	–
24	Caucasian	Italian	D&I Leader	F	Italy	Long-term working experience in the same PSFs in Italy	–
25	Caucasian	Italian	Partner	F	Italy	Long-term working experience in the same PSFs in Italy	Background in law
26	Turkish	Turkish	Partner	M	Italy	Long-term working experience in PSFs across Turkey and Italy	Married to an Italian woman
27	Persian	Iran	Senior Associate	F	Italy	Prior working experience in Iran and in other industries	–
28	African	Moroccan	Partner	M	Italy	Prior international working experience in other industries	–
29	African	Moroccan	Manager	M	Italy	Prior international working experience in other industries	–
30	Japanese	Japanese	Manager	F	Italy	Prior working international (i.e., Mexico) experience in other industries	–
31	Chinese	Chinese	Deals Director	F	Italy	Long-term working experience in PSFs across China and Italy	–
32	Caucasian	Italian	HR Business Partner	F	Italy	Long-term working experience in PSFs in Italy	No international experience
33	Caucasian	Italian	HR Generalist	F	Italy	Short-term working experience in PSFs	–
34	Caucasian	Polish	Senior Manager	F	Italy	Long-term working experience in PSFs across Poland and Italy	Working experience in education
35	Caucasian	Polish	Manager	F	Italy	Prior working experience in other industries across Poland and Italy	Speaks Italian; slight non-Italian sounding accent
36	Caucasian	German	D&I Leader	F	Germany, Europe	Long-term working experience in the same PSFs	No international experience

view of work and sharpened our focus on the shared meanings and relationships across the different worlds of concern that led to different forms of social-symbolic work. Thus, we determined each action undertaken by the professionals to confront discrimination, the intentions of each, as informed by our interviews, and the related aggregated forms of work. Therefore, we produced another set of codes, related to the emergent forms of work performed by professionals in PSFs to confront discrimination. Tables 2 and 3 present our data structure.

Finally, we worked across the data sources to search for similarities and differences in these individual backgrounds and the related worlds of concern that led to diverse forms of self, organization, and institutional social-symbolic work (Eisenhardt, 1989). We examined the relationships among the conceptual categories and integrated the literature to build a theoretical model explaining how the categories were related. Then, we grouped our theoretical categories into aggregated theoretical dimensions and drew upon this base to model how social-symbolic work is motivated by the interplay of different worlds of concern and how this work ultimately has implications, via the resistance-maintenance paradigm, for systemic inequality. To present the findings coherently, we have paired each category with ‘power quotes’ (Pratt, 2009).

Findings

In answering our research question, we present evidence for the different forms of social-symbolic work individuals perform when confronting discrimination based on ethnicity in Italian branches of North American PSFs.

Figure 1 provides a graphical representation of our findings. First, it illustrates four forms of the worlds of concern experienced by the focal professionals: the direct experience of discrimination (having been the direct target in one or more discrimination episodes); the sensibility to it on the basis of personal affiliations (having been touched by one or more discrimination episodes due to the closeness with someone who directly experienced it); the awareness of it on the basis of one’s professional role (having been informed about discrimination episodes due to access to data or observations in the workplace); or the ignorance of and disregard for discrimination. The first three denote some form of concern for ethnic discrimination, while the last indicates ‘unconcern,’ the total lack thereof. Next, the figure illustrates a series of arrows connecting the worlds of concern to different forms of social-symbolic work. These worlds of concern shape the professionals’ attitudes toward discrimination; these are depicted through the arrows, with the emotional component being particularly relevant in activating different forms of work. Full arrows indicate attitudes

driven by worlds of concern closer to direct experiences of discrimination and characterized by negative emotions regarding ethnic discrimination, while dotted arrows represent attitudes driven by worlds of concern beyond direct experiences of discrimination and characterized by neutral emotions. Last, the figure illustrates the effects of identified forms of individual social-symbolic work in relation to the maintenance-resistance paradigm on systemic inequality, which have implications for organizations and societies. In the first upper block, the figure depicts what forms of work contribute to resisting systemic discrimination on the basis of ethnicity (i.e., finding a compromise for their careers); the second block contains the three organizational and institutional outcomes of the identified forms of work, all contributing to the maintenance of systemic inequality in and around organizations. Consistent with the social-symbolic view of work, these findings are assessed and interpreted in light of two elements of situatedness: the roles and resources in PSFs (i.e., expected elite identity and employees’ roles and duties) and the characteristics of the Italian context (i.e., ethnic diversity not perceived to be a priority, poor application of formal shared regulations).

Accordingly, we find that individuals develop sets of experiences characterized by different levels of vulnerability and sensibility to ethnic discrimination. We define these worlds of concern as follows: ‘Direct Experience of Ethnic Discrimination; ‘Sensibility to Ethnic Discrimination,’ on the basis of one’s personal affiliations; ‘Awareness of Ethnic Discrimination,’ on the basis of one’s professional role; and ‘Blissful Ignorance of and Disregard for Ethnic Discrimination.’ As shown in Fig. 1, these experiences encourage the social-symbolic work through which professionals express and affirm their identities with reference to, among others, their ethnic origin (‘soft contesting work’) or balance their identities with emotions and the construction of careers in reaction to different forms of direct discrimination (‘balancing work’). They also work to respond to the duties of their roles by repositioning the boundaries of existing D&I practices to address discrimination and reinforce organizational image and identity (‘reshaping work’). Finally, they support existing practices and thus sustain ‘business as usual’ (‘justification work’). The social symbolic objects involved in these forms of work are emotions, identities, careers of professionals, organizational practices (D&I ones) and wider institutional orders (how these practices contribute to perpetuating inequality). As the arrows in Fig. 1 make clear, the same worlds of concern can concurrently lead to different forms of social-symbolic work on these objects. We have also found that professionals work on more than one social-symbolic object simultaneously.

Below, we first describe and exemplify the following overarching categories of worlds of concern: having directly experienced and being sensible to and aware of ethnic

Table 2 Data structure of the worlds of concern developed by professionals in the Italian PSF branches

1st order concepts	2nd Order Concepts	Aggregated Dimensions
<i>Individual Experience of Discrimination/Difficulties in Integrating in the Italian Society/Disclosure of Discrimination</i>	<i>Type of Discrimination Experienced/Witnessed Episodes of Discrimination/Overall Consideration of the issue</i>	<i>Worlds of Concern</i>
Discrimination over one's ethnicity in the form of social exclusion in the relationship with the client	Direct experience of discrimination in the relation between the firm and its stakeholders	Direct Experience of Ethnic Discrimination
Discrimination over one's ethnicity in the form of perceived biases in competence	Discrimination over one's ethnicity in the form of perceived career opportunities	
Discrimination over one's ethnicity in the form of less perceived career opportunities	Direct experience of discrimination in relations with colleague and clients	
Discrimination over one's ethnicity in the form of difficulty expressing opinions and communicating		
Discrimination over one's ethnicity in the form of perceived lack of responsibility and authority		
Discrimination over one's ethnicity in the form of jokes and microaggressions		
Difficulty in integrating in the Italian culture		
Reflection over the experience of a non-Caucasian member of one's family	Sensibility to discrimination based on ethnicity based on personal experience	Sensibility to Ethnic Discrimination on the basis of one's personal affiliations
Personal sensibility and attention to the topic of discrimination based on ethnicity		
Being a witness of discrimination occurring in relationships with clients	Awareness of discrimination based on ethnicity in relationships between the firm and its stakeholders	Awareness of Ethnic Discrimination on the basis of one's professional role
Being a witness of discrimination occurring in the firm's recruiting process	Awareness of discrimination based on ethnicity before entering the firm	
Being informally informed of episodes of discrimination by colleagues	Awareness of discrimination based on ethnicity in the firm	
Availability and study of data about ethnicity in the firm		
Lack of direct evidence of discrimination based on ethnicity in the firm	Unawareness of discrimination based on ethnicity in the firm	Blissful Ignorance of and Disregard for Ethnic Discrimination
Lack of reported evidence of discrimination based on ethnicity in the firm		
General idea of discrimination based on ethnicity as an issue relevant at the country level		
'Blind' trust in existing D&I practices to address (eventual) episodes of discrimination	Superficiality in the consideration of discrimination based on ethnicity in the firm	
Considering oneself detached from the issue of discrimination based on ethnicity	Intention to ignore discrimination based on ethnicity occurring in the firm	

Table 3 Data structure of the social symbolic work performed by professionals in Italian PSF branches to confront ethnic discrimination

1st order concepts	2nd order concepts	Aggregated dimensions
<i>Actions of Professionals to Confront Discrimination based on Ethnicity/General Approach to the issue</i>	<i>Intentions of Professionals when Acting/Avoiding to Act to Confront Discrimination</i>	<i>Forms of Social Symbolic Work enacted by professionals to confront Discrimination based on Ethnicity</i>
Wearing clothes and hairstyles related to one's characteristics at work	Voluntary expression of one's diversity in the workplace	'Soft contesting work' to express one's true identity and opinions of the D&I approach
Bringing traditional food related to one's characteristics at work		
Sharing stories and festivities related to one's religion at work		
Making one's culture known in the firm		
Clarification of the assumptions and prejudices related to one's religion at work	Clarification of one's identity with colleagues and clients	
Defending one's nationality to colleagues holding prejudices		
Informally criticizing the limits of the firm's D&I practices	Discussion and critique of the firm's D&I practices	
Ignoring/Avoiding D&I initiatives targeting ethnicity in the firm		
Avoiding to report lived episodes of discrimination to colleagues and the HR	Silencing negative emotions linked to discrimination and focusing on one's career	'Balancing work' to stabilize identities with emotions and careers
Giving up expecting the firm to address discrimination		
Construction of an Italian identity 'sellable' to clients	Transforming one's expressed identity and focusing on one's career	
Being advised to adapt one's leadership behavior to the Italian expectations		
Design of mandatory training on the biases associated with ethnicity	Adaptation and update of existing practices	'Reshaping work' to adapt the boundaries of organization identity, image, and D&I practices
Use of grievance systems to allow reporting of harassment episodes related to ethnicity		
Data collection of employees' stories related to discrimination based on ethnicity	Adaptation and update of legal boundaries and sphere of influence	
Redefinition of what constitutes discrimination based on ethnicity in the firm		
Communication of the alignment of D&I initiatives focused on ethnicity with other D&I initiatives	Maintain a positive image and reputation in the eyes of stakeholders	
Communication of the renewed interest in discrimination based on ethnicity to stakeholders		
Reliance on existing D&I tools as enough to address (potential) discrimination based on ethnicity	Postpone interventions for discrimination based on ethnicity for the sake of maintaining existing practices	'Justification work' to support institutionalized practices and maintain business stability
Adducing an ethical justification to discrimination episodes in the relation with stakeholders	Justify discriminatory behavior of stakeholders for the sake of business stability	
Avoiding relying on one's position and power in the firm to intervene in the relationship with the client		

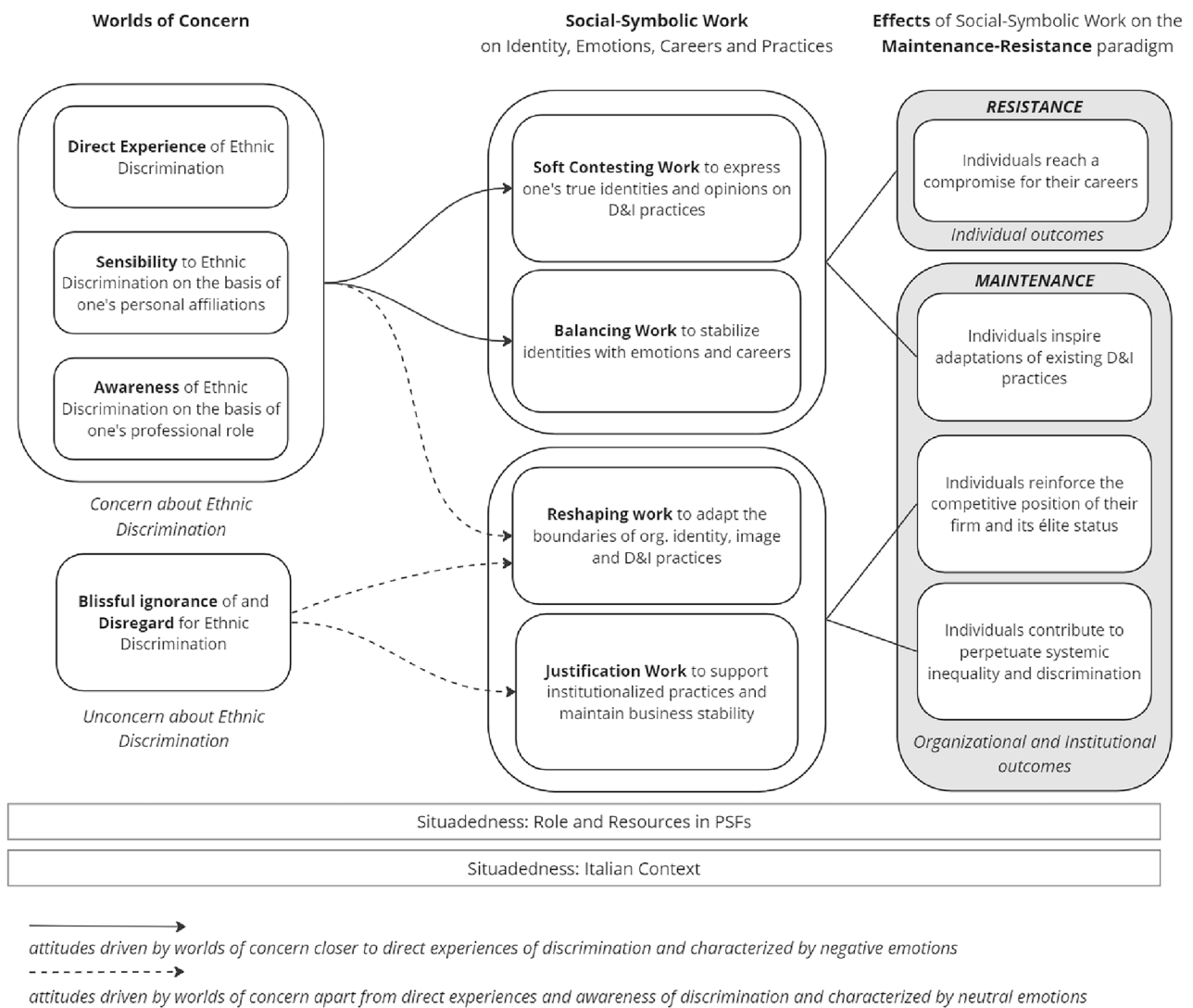


Fig. 1 Graphic representation of our findings: The interplay of different worlds of concern and forms of social-symbolic work, contributing to the maintenance-resistance paradigm

discrimination (i.e., being ‘concerned’) or ignoring and disregarding the topic (i.e., being ‘unconcerned’). Next, we present each form of social-symbolic work associated with one or more worlds of concern by using exemplary quotes and discussing, for each, the current professional role, gender, present nationality, and ethnic origin of the interviewee.

The Making of Professionals’ Worlds of Concern: Direct, Observed, and Neglected Episodes of Ethnic Discrimination

Direct Experience of Ethnic Discrimination

First, our results highlight how professionals can have personal experiences with ethnic discrimination. These experiences contribute to the construction of the robust concern

for ethnic discrimination in their firms. We first present two experiences of non-Caucasian professionals:

I was born in a <name of a religious minority in Iran> family. [...] My faith is discriminated against in Iran. [...] As for my story, it is a difficult one, which has taught me not to surrender in front of difficulties related to discrimination because I was highly discriminated against in my country of origin. Here (in Italy), I understand that I am foreign, but to be discriminated against is a lot different to me. (*Senior Associate, Woman, Iranian, Persian*)

As a foreign woman responsible for a lot of people and important projects...I worked in an <Italian firm>, and I experienced highly factual discrimination there. [...] I am stronger than they are, but those two years

were not easy for me. [...] In the project with <PSF name>, there have been forms of ‘light’ discrimination. Anyway, a female manager cannot..., especially for workers, they still think a woman cannot tell them what to do. (*Project Manager*, Woman, Indian, Indian)

These quotes exemplify the experiences of these women with explicit discrimination based on their backgrounds and how these inform the construction of a world of concern, i.e., their specific, strong sensibility and attention to ethnic discrimination. On the one hand, we observe that this creates a perception of a safer and more advanced environment in the current workplace (i.e., discrimination perceived as ‘light’ and not comparable to that occurring ‘out there’). On the other hand, we have examined such events in non-Caucasian males’ lives and careers and obtained similar interpretations of the current working contexts in PSFs.

Nevertheless, once these non-Caucasian professionals enter Italian PSF branches, our results reveal cases of social exclusion and bias related to competence among clients and senior colleagues. Here, we thus provide and discuss the following two examples:

I remember that one time—I already was a project leader; so, I was the one in charge of managing everything—the client kept referring to someone else in my team, while I was the one in charge. The partner, mistakenly but intending to protect me, took control and addressed the client’s questions. [...] That time, it was clearly due to diversity—what kind of diversity, I am not sure, because I have them all. (*Project Leader*, Woman, Italian, African)

I remember my first project in Italy, striving to obtain respect from the client for not being an Italian native speaker. As you can hear, I can easily understand and speak Italian, even if I struggle just a little.⁵ [...] People would strangely look at me and not want to talk to me. They did not respect me for my knowledge and my personality. (*Project Leader*, Man, Brazilian, Caucasian)

Our analysis shows that while individuals initially develop the idea that PSFs are benign spaces, they can experience discrimination due to the behavior and expectations of clients, often supported by senior colleagues, such as partners, as our examples show. In the experiences of female professionals, we more often find the aggravating factor of a lack of recognition of their authority in their teams and

their relationships with clients. We find that these worlds of concern, related to the direct experience of discrimination experienced not only inside but also prior to or outside the working context, motivate individuals’ social-symbolic work—to boldly express their identities at work to stabilize their identities and emotions with professional careers.

Sensibility to Ethnic Discrimination on the Basis of One’s Personal Affiliations

Our results highlight cases of ‘indirect’ discrimination, whereby professionals are not the direct targets but become mindful of it via personal affiliations (e.g., married to a person of another ethnic group, volunteering for dedicated associations). These experiences make professionals more prone to recognize and react to discrimination. We mostly observe them among Caucasian professionals, including HR experts, those specializing in the management of D&I, and non-Caucasian professionals at different levels who have not directly lived discrimination in PSFs but have observed it. For example, we illustrate the case of HR professionals in the following quotes:

I never worked on the topic of racism for this firm, unfortunately; anyway, it is something that, with D&I, is very close to my heart. (*Recruiting Director*, Woman, Italian, Caucasian)

My husband is <a member of an ethnic minority in his country>. We had a big scandal when many members of his community were sent back. So, I am very obsessed about how the government handled it because this people faced a lot of hostility. [...] I think we are really confused by now and simply not ready, that it is very important to start talking about it in a structured way. (*D&I Leader*, Woman, English, Caucasian)

As these quotes exemplify, some professionals have a personal interest in and pay attention for the social issue of racism, which helps them to be attentive to what happens in their firms. The recruiting director used her experience as a volunteer outside the workplace to nurture her need to participate in fighting racism. Next, the D&I leader explained how the story concerning her husband’s ethnic group made her mindful of how ethnic integration is handled, with these considerations being followed by her statements as a D&I expert in her firm. Moreover, we found that non-Caucasian professionals can develop this sensibility based on their volunteering experiences regarding matters related to ethnicity.

⁵ With others, this interview was conducted in Italian and translated into English. This professional from Brazil told us about his Italian origin, which makes him look Italian. For this reason, we indicate Caucasian as his ethnic group.

Awareness of Ethnic Discrimination on the Basis of One's Professional Role

Next, we illustrate the case of professionals not being the direct target of discrimination but becoming aware of it in their firm due to their role, responsibility, and access to data. This world of concern relates to HR and D&I professionals in PSFs, who generally have access to the demographic data of employees. While our interviews confirmed, consistent with Italian and EU policies, that these professionals are not allowed to ask individuals about their ethnicity, we found that considerations of the nationality, physical appearance, and storytelling of colleagues contribute to constructing a form of concern for the topic, denoted as general awareness. This renders these professionals sufficiently knowledgeable of circumstances related to ethnic discrimination in their firm to recognize and address it consistently via their roles and responsibilities. Here, we consider the case of Italian female HR professionals sharing their concerns regarding the use of the Italian language in interactions with clients. We present the following quote:

Honestly, I think language is an issue mostly when we are with the clients. We often work with small and medium enterprises, so relatively small clients, and no one speaks English in these enterprises. Someone from another country as a non-Italian-born speaker might perceive some form of discrimination. For example, if we have coffee or dinner with these clients, everyone is speaking only Italian. Of course, this makes communication harder. (*Career Specialist*, Woman, Italian, Caucasian)

Given the use of the Italian language and even the perception of non-Italian sounding accents, HR professionals are often aware of other biases linked to the appearance of non-Caucasian individuals (e.g., wearing a hijab or informal clothes). This awareness of discrimination can extend from their experiences as recruiters, as clearly exemplified in the next quote:

I remember that during a group job interview, there was one candidate from a modest family and a different ethnicity. He was wearing jeans and a shirt. Ninety percent of the people we hire are highly educated, and they come to the job interview wearing suits and ties. I had the feeling that the negative comments on this specific candidate [...] would have been less rigid if he were Caucasian. (*Recruiting Director*, Woman, Italian, Caucasian)

Both the above examples clarify how professionals can build their worlds of concern around their awareness of discrimination occurring in their firms as biases concerning the use of the Italian language and the physical appearances

of non-Caucasians and non-Italians. We also find that professionals in PSFs have the same concerns regarding what occurs outside the illusory, safe environment of their firms. Hence, we report that HR and D&I personnel in the focal Italian PSF branches are mostly Italian Caucasian women who are not focused on ethnic diversity but aware of its increasing importance in Italy. We present the following exemplary quote regarding the awareness of this gap:

If I think about the Italian workforce and if I compare it with the European one, I have to say that unfortunately, there is a great distance. As for ethnicity and gender, we are still victims of a lot of discrimination. [...] Italian culture has decided not to answer this call. (*Career Specialist*, Woman, Italian, Caucasian)

'Blissful Ignorance of and Disregard for Ethnic Discrimination

This world of concern includes both the experiences of professionals genuinely ignorant that ethnic discrimination is an issue in their firms and those who decide to consider it marginal.

For the former, as the following quotes highlight, we find that some HR and D&I professionals hold the wrong impression, i.e., discrimination based on ethnicity is not something occurring in their firms. Clearly, however, our interviews with non-Caucasian professionals provide a different picture. We offer some illustrative quotes:

No, I would say that in our firm, I have not observed discrimination episodes, neither I have been told about anything like that. (*Career Specialist*, Female, Italian, Caucasian)

I have to say I do not see any risks related to ethnicity in our firm. I can only see an opportunity. [...] We will keep doing what our North American colleagues did and keep hoping it will not be necessary to act against discrimination based on race. (*D&I Leader*, Female, Italian, Caucasian)

In these biased views of Caucasian professionals, we find that some recognize a gap in the hierarchy with respect to how the issue of discrimination based on ethnicity is considered, indicating how the issue is often seen as marginal in light of the intensity of business agendas:

I think there is a hole between managers, partners, senior managers, and the lower part of the pyramid. The more you go up in the hierarchy, the more this perception changes. [...] I mean, you have goals, and agendas, that make it harder for you to consider these issues. So, I think that sometimes what happens is that this distance is more evident. (*Project Leader*, Man, Brazilian, Caucasian)

This quote explains why some senior professionals might not be sufficiently informed of the possibility of ethnic discrimination in their firms. Overall, then, we find that Italian Caucasian professionals are less concerned or not at all concerned about other ethnic groups in their firms, and we also observe a general ‘superficiality’ among HR and D&I figures.

For the second highlighted case (i.e., intentionally considering ethnicity marginal), we find that some Caucasian professionals tend to ignore discrimination in their firms. Even those with international experience often present ethnic discrimination as something marginal with respect to where their firm operates and their role in it. We report the cases of two salient Caucasian male professionals in the following quotes:

If I have to refer to <PSF name> and the context where I work, I have to say no. [...] In Italy, we are an elite environment from this point of view, where these differences should be perceived less than in other countries. (*Project Leader*, Man, Italian, Caucasian)

I cannot say. These issues are very distant to me...I am very privileged. [...] Honestly, I struggle linking what we see in this firm to situations of...discrimination of that kind, like based on ethnicity. First, we should say that the <Italian branch of the PSF> does not have a situation worthy of attention on this, like there could be in other countries. (*HR Senior Manager*, Man, Caucasian, Italian)

Here, we highlight how some Caucasian professionals disregard ethnicity as an issue in their firms, even referring to their privilege as an excuse. Below, for each world of concern presented in this section, we illustrate the associated form(s) of social-symbolic work.

The Social-symbolic Work for Challenging and Upholding Ethnic Discrimination

As Fig. 1 summarizes, the identified worlds of concern are associated with forms of social-symbolic work that resist (‘soft contesting’ work) or continue supporting the status quo (‘balancing,’ ‘reshaping’ and ‘justification’ work). We thus illustrate how their worlds of concern can motivate professionals to perform a variety of actions according to their attitudes toward ethnic discrimination.

‘Soft Contestation Work’ on Identities

Professionals who have directly experienced discrimination can perform work that *softly* contests it in their firms. In the PSF context, we label this form of work ‘soft’ because it

does not represent an effective contestation but rather informal and light critiques and forms of resistance.

Our findings show that non-Caucasian professionals can perform this kind of work when they directly experience discrimination, for example, social exclusion, competence bias, or a lack of recognition of their authority. We observe that this world of concern generates a negative attitude toward the salient episode of discrimination, leading some professionals to express disagreement and react by explicitly affirming the different aspects of their identities to express themselves in their workplace in more authentic and personal ways.

We find that some individuals thus perform material identity work to make their ethnicity more visible (e.g., wearing traditional clothes and bringing local food to work); others participate in discursive work on their identities to clarify their origins and reconstruct their identities, despite prejudices and biases (e.g., clarification of one’s religious affiliation or discussion of the business case for diversity). These actions also involve a relational dimension in terms of why individuals start informal conversations. The following quote from a female professional exemplifies this:

At first, I was not sure if I could wear a turban at work, especially in some contexts. I was asking myself all the time, ‘Is it okay to go to a meeting like that?’ [...] I believe this is something people appreciate. It is a way to start a conversation in an informal way, even when you are with a client. It is a way to say that you are different and that you want to be different in some way when you wear, I don’t know, an African-themed shirt at work. (*Project Leader*, Woman, Italian, African)

This quote demonstrates the contesting work linked to the material expression of a professional’s personal identity and ethnicity. Clearly, the work of this professional is to show her ethnic origin, thereby presenting her identity in contrast to that demanded by her PSF (i.e., formal clothing and formality with the client and within the workplace). Another example entails sharing one’s ethnicity via national and religious traditions at work, as illustrated in the following quote:

As for freedom of expression, I think this depends on the cultural background. For example, in my case, when there is an Indian festivity, I celebrate with my Italian colleagues by bringing some traditional Indian food to work or by wearing Indian clothes, and everyone seems to be appreciative. (*Project Manager*, Woman, Indian, Indian)

Apparently, this Indian project manager engages in material work that shares her identity at work, represented by her religion and the traditions of her country. This quote also highlights the relational aspect of her work and the perceived appreciation of her colleagues. Interestingly, the

material expression of identity can inspire the work of others in the same direction. Here, we provide an exemplary quote based on the experience of the project leader reported above:

A female colleague came once and asked me this question: 'Have you ever had any issue with the way you dress?', and I said no. [...] I think this is something people notice and that makes them want to express themselves a little bit more. (*Project Leader, Woman, Italian, African*)

Thus, as a critique of the formal elite identities of professionals, soft contesting work can also be viewed as a form of hidden collective work that discusses the status of non-Caucasians in PSFs.

In the experiences of non-Caucasian male professionals, we find that soft contesting work is enacted as the reconstruction of identity. We also observe Caucasian female professionals of non-Italian nationality engaging in this clarification to defend their identity and position in their firm. Here, we present two illustrative quotes:

I have contributed to making my culture known in my firm. [...] I am often asked about the life of women in Turkey. A colleague, as a joke, kept asking: 'Do you eat bread?' [...] Informally, I talk to colleagues to explain the traits, concepts, and peculiarities of my culture (Islam). For example, during the timeframe in which Islam was linked to terroristic attacks by ISIS, I have found myself giving explanations many times to clarify the reason behind some dynamics. (*Partner, Male, Turkish, Turkish*)

I might have been subject to unconscious biases since I come from Poland. Poland is considered worse than Italy, and Italians always think Italy is the best of all. I was not seen as a Dutch person, so to speak. [...] I am pro-Poland, so... I get angry, and I feel that being Polish is something that makes me strong. My personality is strong; so, I don't allow people to say these things. I never felt insulted. With clients, maybe. (*Manager, Woman, Polish, Caucasian*)

These quotes show how professionals react to prejudice and jokes. While they generally find the overall context of their firm to be inclusive and would not define these episodes as discrimination, they perform the reconstruction of their identity, linking it to their ethnicity (religious affiliation, ethnicity, nationality) when perceiving their background has been misinterpreted and biased against by colleagues. We also show that prejudices toward non-Italian professionals exist independent of skin color, as illustrated in the case of the bias toward the Polish professional and the discursive contesting work she performed.

Moreover, we observe the experiences of professionals frustrated by comments on their different cultures and the approaches of their firms to diversity; they engage in discursive work to clarify how they would prefer ethnic diversity to be considered. We therefore present the following exemplary quote:

As for what I don't agree on, the firm emphasizes that diversity is how diverse we are from each other, and in doing so, it does not focus on what we have in common. [...] I don't believe that focusing on the fact that we are different will help. This is my opinion. If someone tells me that I am diverse, I answer, 'You are also diverse to me, we all are.' (*Manager, Male, Italian, South American*)

Thus, another shade of this form of work is the contestation of the D&I practices in use. Indeed, all the above quotes illustrate how professionals perform soft forms of contestation, in the form of material, relational or discursive work, in response to direct experiences of discrimination in and around their job in the Italian branch of a PSF. The analysis of their interviews confirms that they consider their PSF an environment where they do not expect discrimination to occur but where they can experience prejudice against their ethnic group, to which they react. Hence, they advance alternatives to the status quo in an informal way, in spaces and relations that they consider safe. They are also aware of their potential to inspire other individuals to confront ethnic discrimination in their firms. Moreover, a pivotal and notable motivation of professionals engaging in this form of work is their pride and confidence in their identities, characterized by the interplay of ethnicity with other characteristics. However, some professionals react differently, leveraging their negative emotions to disguise and silence their identities and emotions and preserve their careers.

'Balancing Work' on Identities, Emotions, and Careers

Professionals directly experiencing discrimination can perform work on regulating their behavior to avoid conflict over, control, and sometimes silence their identities and emotions to preserve their careers. We label this form of work 'balancing work,' as it consists of reaching stability across these social-symbolic objects. We start by presenting the case of professionals weighing their identities against the ones required by their relationships with clients, who represent the core of the PSF business. We thus present an illustrative quote:

I have had some feelings about...things that made me think there was some prejudice against me. It happened in the Northeast of Italy. One of the jokes was 'to do business in these areas, you have to talk to the

entrepreneur using the local dialect'. [...] I am recently having a beautiful experience with an entrepreneur in Umbria. I am doing my part. I am 'selling' to him my Italian integrated identity. (*Partner, Male, Turkish, Turkish*)

This quote shows how professionals react, stabilizing their negative emotions amid the perception of prejudice against their identities and careers. This case provides an example of a partner who is married to an Italian woman and decides to leverage his 'Italian integrated identity,' regardless of ethnicity, in response to the need to conduct business with Italian entrepreneurs in ways that are considered acceptable (e.g., showing an Italian origin). While this professional negotiates a novel identity, we find others suppressing their negative emotions. Here, we provide a first example:

Once, the partner in my company told me 'Listen, don't say that you are from Brazil. Some people might feel offended by that'. I felt very sorry when I realized there is still a lot of prejudice from the clients. [...] I try not to answer using the same tone. What I do is bring the case to my manager and partner to discuss it. Until now, I have always tried to ignore and go on with the project. (*Project Leader, Man, Brazilian, Caucasian*)

The work of this professional exemplifies another way through which identity, negative emotions and careers can be balanced: deciding not to respond to the discriminatory behaviors of clients and to the missed standpoint of the project leader. Interestingly, we find that the same mechanism, via the work of professionals, occurs not only when clients express their prejudices but also when individuals feel excluded by their own colleagues, as illustrated here:

Italians tend to ask about what I like in Italy and do not ask about my country or my experiences outside of Italy. [...] These questions really make me feel bad because they force me to say that I like Italy, which Italian people would like to know not because they care about us, but only about themselves. [...] Because of the language, I had a lot of barriers to get promoted or to catch opportunities too. [...] I just gave up expecting people to think about me or do something for me and focus on what I have to deal with in my career. (*Manager, Woman, Japanese, Japanese*)

As exemplified above, then, the use of language, accent strength and perceived nationality represent key issues in the exclusion of non-Italian professionals in the focal PSFs. This Japanese manager has silenced her disappointment in the behavior of Italian colleagues to pursue her career, not acting any further to feel integrated. The analysis of her interview thus shows that this largely depends on her cultural

background and, specifically, her difficulty making her ideas heard compared to those of her Italian colleagues. Similarly, we analyze the case of Albanian Caucasian professionals who avoid referencing their origins due to their lack of a non-Italian-sounding accent. We observe comparable results in the case of Chinese professionals, who find it difficult to be heard and recognized. In this respect, our results highlight how professionals who have developed, through their role in their organization, a certain awareness of the topic of ethnic discrimination can perform balancing work as well. Hence, we present one exemplary case of a Caucasian partner advising a colleague to adapt to Italian culture:

I think that we support these people. But I believe they don't feel fully heard. For example, one of my colleagues from China – she is very polite – told me that she had to manage a team, and her collaborators were not really listening to her. I told her to be more incisive and warned her that Italian employees can be bad with foreign colleagues. (*HR Business Partner, Female, Italian, Caucasian*)

Nevertheless, our results show that professionals may perform two forms of social-symbolic work: expressing their identities to colleagues and clients on some occasions or silencing these identities and balancing them with negative emotions and careers on others. As we illustrate in Fig. 1, the difference between these two attitudes and related forms of work concerns how these professionals decide to react to the emotions caused by discriminatory acts (both lived and observed). Those who experience direct discrimination experience negative emotions (e.g., anger), speaking up and thereby engaging in work aimed at resisting the status quo and aspiring to change (i.e., soft contesting work). Professionals can also act on other negative emotions (e.g., regret), disengaging and giving up, performing work aimed at balancing the tradeoffs among their emotions, identities, and careers. Those who have built a sensibility to ethnic discrimination can also perform forms of work aimed at protecting individuals involved in discrimination, advising them to balance their emotions to preserve their own careers (i.e., balancing work). Moreover, the situatedness of professionals in their firm—their role as well as the resources they have access to—notably motivates their work. For example, an HR partner—i.e., with access to data on ethnic discrimination and its forms in the organization by holding a senior role—performs work advising colleagues to balance their emotions with other needs (preserving professional identities and their related careers). In addition, professionals with direct experience of discrimination perform soft contesting work when their position in their firm is not representative of its D&I approach (e.g., project leaders).

Thus, we find that the concern for ethnic discrimination can activate additional forms of social-symbolic work. Next,

we illustrate how the sensibility to and awareness of ethnic discrimination can make professionals perform work that *reshapes* extant organizational practices.

'Reshaping Work' on Organizational Identity, Image, and Practices

Professionals sensible to and aware of discrimination occurring in the focal Italian PSF branches, who are mostly Caucasian, adapt their roles and related activities to fit the rising cases of discrimination based on ethnicity. We find that while some perform discursive and relational work with members of diverse ethnic groups to rethink the extant practices, others perform material work that exploits storytelling and experiences to increase other individuals' awareness of the discrimination occurring and rethink some aspects of the related D&I practices. In doing so, these professionals reshape existing practices; they change and adapt the initiatives these practices consist of (the boundaries) without necessarily intervening in their essence (assumptions and possible drawbacks). Thus, reshaping work is a form of boundary work performed by professionals to maintain stability and preserve the image and reputation of their firm. We therefore present two exemplary quotes. The first represents the discursive work needed to present the D&I approach in Europe and Italy, and the other focuses on the specificity of the Italian approach:

We have some mandatory training on this topic. [...] But, we have taken steps to make sure this isn't the only thing that we do. The idea is to bring people together in workshops to explore the data and see what can be done. On the other side, to get to the emotion and the empathy to understand the experience of people and understand the pain of exclusion. (*D&I Associate Director*, Female, English, Caucasian)

We will start from communication, work on the communication of this topic, to integrate the elements that are already in our agenda in order to make it more explicit; [...] we will include this as one of the elements we discuss in our workshops dedicated to inclusion; and we will benefit from the work done by our colleagues in North America, hoping not to have warnings for racist episodes and that it won't be necessary to employ the tools to manage them. In the case we do have some, we will intervene with clear and straight action. (*D&I Leader*, Female, Italian, Caucasian)

These quotes clearly exemplify the work that is performed to reshape the boundaries of existing D&I practices in PSFs enacted by D&I professionals. The first quote clarifies the guidelines received from headquarters. This indication comes from an English professional following the

North American approach to D&I, which is mostly oriented toward rendering training on ethnicity (and related biases) mandatory across European branches. The latter quote shows how this approach is reported in the Italian case, by Italian professionals, addressing ethnic discrimination similar to any other topic related to D&I and mirroring the abovementioned approach. Hence, while we find some professionals aware that ethnicity is relevant and cognizant of its potential for discrimination, we also observe how this is not planned to be addressed directly or on the basis of contingent local needs. Instead, these professionals perform work that adapts extant initiatives to the increasing issues related to ethnicity. Interestingly, this entails listening to the experiences of individuals (i.e., grievance systems and informal storytelling) and aims to preserve the elite image and identity of the organization (i.e., advanced D&I practices, inclusive environment, and high-status workforce). Thus, we illustrate how the activity of listening to professionals' experiences of discrimination is not directly aimed at addressing it but at making everyone aware of the need to promote and adapt practices aimed at managing diversity. We exemplify this in the following quote:

We have a letterbox where everyone can report if they are experiencing discomfort due to their diversity. Three years ago, this was about harassment. [...] Now, we could include religion and ethnicity as well. (*Career Specialist*, Female, Italian, Caucasian)

This example demonstrates the mere adaptation of existing grievance systems to report cases of harassment linked to discrimination based on ethnicity and religious affiliation.

In conclusion, we find these forms of social-symbolic work are organization work performed to maintain the PSF as an elite organization, i.e., to communicate that episodes of discrimination are formally addressed and solved. Ultimately, this form of work contributes to maintaining the status quo while repositioning and adapting an existing approach to fit diversity in the case of Italian branches. Our data also show that this enforces the image of the PSFs in the eyes of all stakeholders, especially their clients, as these further, cross-level quotes reveal:

We have got to be diverse, to meet the needs of all of our clients as well. So, I think it is a moral and ethical imperative, as well as a commercial one. [...] We think it is the right thing to do. I think, increasingly and rightly, that our employees expect us to meet these standards, our clients expect us to meet these standards, and of course, through the legislation and requirements, many governments expect us to do this as well. (*Head of Legal*, Male, English, Caucasian)

I believe that most of our clients, our primary stakeholders, the first ones we need to account for, appreci-

ate the fact that we are a firm that is exposing itself to declare transparently its objectives about ethnicity. (*D&I Leader*, Female, Italian, Caucasian)

The work undertaken by the head of the legal department in a PSF is another typical example of reshaping work. This professional's role involves formally classifying ethnicity and negotiating the boundaries of what is (and is not) tolerated in the firm. Therefore, he engages in discursive work concerning ethnic diversity, a business imperative. The second example, again, shows how Italian professionals perform reshaping work, adapting global figures to the case of Italy by adapting the extant approaches to the local case. These examples therefore suggest that on the one hand, engaging in discursive reshaping work can be simply a rhetorical exercise that preserves the organization's identity and image; on the other hand, we also observe genuine trust in D&I practices. As we depict in Fig. 1, different attitudes emerge when professionals perform reshaping work. More specifically, we find that they leverage more neutral emotions (e.g., indifference), as expected from their role and position in their firm as well as their genuine ignorance of discrimination episodes (e.g., no access to data, absence of non-Italians in their teams). This leads to work that leaves the assumptions behind the D&I approach unaltered while intervening in a single initiative within the same D&I practice. Indeed, reshaping work is also performed by professionals with blissful ignorance of the issue of ethnic discrimination, as we illustrate in Fig. 1. Moreover, those ignoring discrimination perform another form of work that justifies the status quo.

'Justification Work' on Institutionalized D&I Practices

Being 'unconcerned' with ethnic discrimination manifests a form of work characterized by denying discrimination and supporting the status quo. We find that some professionals, on the basis of their blissful ignorance of or intentional disregard for discrimination, ultimately assert that what their firm is doing is enough. Hence, they 'justify' any alleged lack of cases of discrimination by maintaining the institutional practices that make PSFs appear stable from a business perspective. Hence, we mostly find that HR and D&I professionals, who are all Caucasians in the case of Italy, perform this form of work, claiming that discrimination based on ethnicity is not a priority, that it probably does not even occur in their firms and that the institutional practices in which their firms are embedded are enough to manage all potential bases of discrimination. This form of work also includes cases of justifying clients' misbehavior for the sake of preserving their business. We also find non-Caucasian individuals engaging in this form of work when they refer to experiences of discrimination

outside their PSF. Below, we first report an example of this justification work, i.e., the discursive effort of D&I professionals to claim that existing D&I practices could address discrimination based on ethnicity, just as any other episode related to diversity categories:

We rely on our existing tools. [...] For example, we have speak-up channels thanks to which we can intervene in the case episodes of racism are shared by our employees. I have not received any warning about that in our company. I think the situation is very similar to the one we had when we started LGBT talks about diversity for the community. (*D&I Leader*, Female, Italian, Caucasian)

This quote provides evidence of the superficial approach to discrimination based on ethnicity and based on the assumption that this issue is not relevant in the context of PSFs in Italy. Relatedly, we show how justification work is also enacted for so-called ethical reasons, i.e., when HR professionals adduce moral and ethical justifications for discriminatory choices and actions that could only relate to the need to maintain a positive business relationship with clients and, therefore, commercial objectives. Hence, we provide the following illustrative quote:

It happened once to have this lunch where there was our <firm name> team and a client, and there was this unpleasant situation concerning the client's comments on the skin-color of a consultant, and there you see an *ethical* issue: 'the client is always right' but, of course, he is not right on these issues. But there is a contact, so not trivial from an ethical perspective. (*Career Specialist*, Woman, Italian, Caucasian).

This case is exemplary of how Caucasian professionals work to justify the misbehavior of clients, even in plain cases of discrimination. This example, along with others, illuminates the other side of the same situation described by the non-Caucasian professionals directly experiencing discrimination. What they find is, often, the institutional work of HR professionals and D&I personnel ignores the episode and focuses on business. Therefore, we find non-Caucasian professionals justifying the behavior of their colleagues to avoid conflict on the basis of the work of the latter, who are senior and Caucasian, to support this situation (i.e., taking control of the situation in the case of conflict and asking questions about one's cultural background). Here, we provide an example of the experiences of a non-Caucasian professional:

I understood he (the partner) was doing it for me to avoid having to manage the situation (with the client) in a complex way. (*Project Leader*, Woman, Italian, African)

Nothing happened because I did not make a scandal out of it. I told what happened to the partner, and I was told: 'Look, I know this is absurd, but this client is a delicate one.' (*Project Leader*, Male, Brazilian, Caucasian)

These two quotes show how professionals accept and justify the behavior of clients to avoid conflict, as informed by the actions of their seniors. Thus, these examples demonstrate the work performed to support an unfair situation created by Caucasian senior figures—to obey hierarchical norms and support a system of inequality in which the 'client is always right.'

A key element of this justification work is professionals' belief that discrimination is not a salient matter in PSFs because of their position and confidence in the efficacy of existing institutional practices in protecting the business. Hence, these individuals support inequality regimes by justifying episodes of discrimination for the sake of maintaining business as usual and protecting relationships with focal clients.

In the next section, we discuss our results and their implications for individuals, organizations such as PSFs, and the institutions in which they are embedded more widely. To support the discussion, we follow it with a short Appendix (see Online Appendix Table 1) that provides a scheme of the D&I practices in use in the focal PSFs.

Discussion

In this manuscript, we provide a model that clarifies the motivations, circumstances, and implications of ethnic discrimination being upheld or challenged in organizations, focusing on the case of the Italian branches of North American PSFs. We accomplish this by adopting the social-symbolic view to address the issue from a systemic perspective (Lawrence & Phillips, 2019) and analyzing the experiences and sensibilities of different professionals to address the topic of racism (Creed et al., 2022). Overall, then, we show how the conditions for workplace inequality are steadily maintained for the sake of business, preserving professionals' elite identities and reinforcing a positive image of the focal organizations and their practices through the different forms of work professionals perform, 'on the ground,' to maintain the status quo (Acker, 2012; Amis et al., 2020; Benschop, 2021). However, we have observed increasing episodes of professionals working to contest these systems through their identities by debating the implications of organizational practices for individuals (and not just 'the business') (Maguire & Hardy, 2009; Martí & Fernández, 2013).

First, we have elaborated a social-symbolical perspective of ethnic discrimination in organizations. We identify the objects on which professionals work to confront ethnic discrimination, encompassing the dimension of the self (identities, emotions, careers), the organization (practices and initiatives they are responsible for, image and reputation of the firm), and the institutions with which the organization operates (practices and approaches considered acceptable in Western countries to address discrimination). Second, our findings reveal the motivations for different forms of work being performed and by whom, explaining the interplay of the worlds of concern developed and held by professionals via different forms of social-symbolic work.

Here, we refer to the discrete features of this interplay to discuss our findings, whereby the worlds of concern represent the motivations and aims preceding work, the social-symbolic actions of professionals display the ways ethnic discrimination is confronted, and the clarification of the effects of each form of work help explain what we call the resistance-maintenance paradigm (see also Fig. 1). Regarding our contribution to the study of social-symbolic work, we offer a picture of *how* discrimination based on professionals' ethnicity occurs and is perpetuated at different levels. We then highlight the forms of self, organization and institutional work that individuals perform to confront discrimination, and we consider the interplay of these three levels with the background, resources, and experiences of individuals regarding the experience and awareness of racism. Creed et al. (2022) define the importance of the process through which individuals build a 'concern' (i.e., a sensibility) as crucial to understanding how discrimination is born, perpetuated, and eventually discussed in organizations. Our findings enable us to establish a connection between this perspective and different forms of social-symbolic work going beyond what extant studies have claimed in this respect. Research has documented various forms of work aimed at maintaining the status quo (i.e., the penalization of ethnic minorities) for the sake of business stability (e.g., Amis et al., 2020; Benschop, 2021). This is exemplified, among others, by the work of Gill (2015) on the reinforcement of elite identities by professionals despite experiencing negative emotions in the workplace, Leslie (2019) on the use of inefficacious D&I practices, and Zanoni and Janssens (2015), who define these practices as a symbolic currency to reaffirm and maintain existing power dynamics. These studies explore different forms of work while often keeping separate their levels of observation (self, organization, institutional) and their implications for workers' identities and emotions as well as for organizational and institutional practices. Moreover, while Lawrence and Phillips (2019) suggest considering previous experiences and backgrounds of individuals as potential antecedents of social-symbolic

work, no study has observed this empirically, examining the interplay of the self, organization, and institutional layers with past individual experiences.

As for our contribution to explaining how ‘systems of inequality’ are maintained (e.g., Benschop, 2021), we illustrate how professionals preserve the inequality entailed in established D&I practices, which are recognized at both the firm and institutional levels (i.e., the North American approach to discrimination characterized by adherence to ‘best practices’) (Alvesson & Robertson, 2006; Boussebaa, 2024; Leslie, 2019; Litvin, 2006). This is particularly evident from the ‘reshaping’ work performed by most HR professionals who ultimately preserve the image associated with their role and their firm by molding the initiatives associated with existing D&I practices without discussing the underlying approaches to how discrimination is addressed. We have even found that such professionals, all Caucasian, can treat ethnic discrimination in the context of their firms as marginal, justifying potential cases as implicit or unintentional, assured that such extant practices prevent discrimination from happening (‘justification’ work). This is the perspective of those who claim that other issues, such as competition becoming stronger in the mature Italian market, are worth considering in PSFs, based on the argument that non-Caucasian professionals still represent a numeric minority in the local context of Italian firms (e.g., Bolzani et al., 2021; Muzio & Faulconbridge, 2013). We also analyze the work of non-Caucasian and non-Italian professionals, explaining how they also contribute to justification and reshaping work, both at the institutional and organizational levels, even by simply being unaware of such effects of their work. This occurs when they collaborate via testimonials in D&I initiatives or when they offer their storytelling for D&I training activities (e.g., Hekman et al., 2017; Leslie, 2019). Notably, they sometimes decide to cooperate in these initiatives because they hold a positive opinion of their firm, in contrast to the Italian national institutions that appear to be extremely averse and merely bureaucratic when addressing ethnicity (e.g., Tarabusi, 2022).

In addition, we show that some professionals perform self work to manage their conflicting emotions across their careers and professional identities (‘balancing’ work), thereby reinforcing the institutional order of PSFs once again (e.g., Gill, 2015). We also illustrate how this form of work is performed when PSF clients act in discriminatory ways but the relationship with them is protected for the sake of business, as well as when non-Italian and non-Caucasian professionals perceive exclusion, based on the use of the Italian language in the workplace, by other colleagues. Again, this form of work contributes to the maintenance of the status quo because such professionals tend to silence their emotions to preserve their careers and the elite identity associated with their roles and the context of their firms.

Only the work of those who engage in the expression of their personal identities at work and who question the status quo of D&I practices (‘soft contesting’ work) can be defined as a form of identity work (e.g., Atewologun et al., 2016) that can slowly but relentlessly subvert actual inequality regimes from within (Amis et al., 2018, 2020; Willmott, 2015). Special days or periods during the year (e.g., religious and national celebrations) are occasions to speak with colleagues regarding religion or cultural traditions, bring national food to work and offer it to colleagues, and wear traditional clothes at work. These are all examples of this silent, soft contestation, which few non-Caucasian employees pursue in Italian PSFs. While occurring informally and adopted to legitimate actions within the rules of their PSF’s institutional order, this self work allows minority employees to balance their personal identity with their requested professional image. However, this enacts a resistance movement that will slowly, and hopefully, elucidate a different way of addressing ethnic diversity in PSFs. Nevertheless, we observe that the ‘size’ of maintenance work largely supersedes that of resistance work (see also Fig. 1).

Our model and findings therefore provide an important contribution to the worlds of concern literature (Creed et al., 2022), illustrating how different experiences with the issue of ethnic discrimination motivate professionals to act to preserve or change the social world around them (Lawrence & Phillips, 2019). We show that the direct experience of discrimination can motivate professionals to react and resist the status quo when they hold enough power and resources to control the effects of their actions (Amis et al., 2020; Willmott, 2015). Existing studies only theorize about a link between worlds of concern and work without empirically providing evidence of how different realms of concern motivate social-symbolic work and related institutional consequences. These studies have claimed that maintenance of the status is attained through the work of individuals to resist change in general (Taupin, 2012) as well as with respect to ethnic discrimination (Amis et al., 2020). However, they do not link the sensibilities individuals developed outside the organizational context with the work they perform in their everyday working lives. Moreover, they miss highlighting the imbalance between sensibilities when entering the organization and how they are disregarded and silenced for the sake of business.

With this regard, we have discussed how senior managers and project leaders perform work that contests D&I practices through informal discursive work or explicitly express their identity traits to discuss them. Using the notion of worlds of concern, we clarify how the roles and resources to which professionals have access enable them to develop a certain idea of the topic of ethnic discrimination and to address it in their firm. Concerning indirect experiences with ethnic discrimination, we show that some

HR and D&I professionals often hold a sensibility to this topic linked to their personal motivations. We also explain how professionals can develop an awareness of ethnic discrimination based on access to data and resources in their professional role, as is, again, the case for HR and D&I personnel. We clarify how these forms of concern motivate different types of work, not necessarily aimed at resisting the status quo; in contrast, we also show how even individuals with a sensibility to ethnic discrimination may ultimately perform work that maintains the status quo, as informed by their professional role. Moreover, we label situations in which professionals ignore ethnic discrimination as an issue in Italian PSF branches, and we explain how this, again, informs maintenance work (e.g., Amis et al., 2020). Thus, through these categories of experiences and related forms of work, we identify a few soft contesters and many supporters of the status quo. While extant studies have questioned the role of the HR in addressing ethnic discrimination, by considering D&I practices merely symbolic (e.g., Dobbin & Kalev, 2017; Leslie, 2019; Zanoni & Janssens, 2015), they have missed to consider the process through which HR professionals contribute to the maintenance of inequality, sometimes inadvertently.

A further contribution of our study, albeit limited, involves the role of intersectionality in professionals' worlds of concern and related forms of work. Specifically, by presenting 'soft contesting' work and the efforts of professionals to expose and clarify their identities, we show how gender and religious affiliation both play an important role; they not only inform the experiences of discrimination these professionals have lived (e.g., Atewologun et al., 2016; Tlaiss, 2015) but also represent the objects they decide to work on (i.e., material and discursive dimensions of their identities) (Lawrence & Phillips, 2019). Finally, we also illustrate how accent strength in the use of the Italian language, as well as other cultural differences (e.g., communication style) (Azab & Holmqvist, 2022; Coluzzi, 2008), create direct experiences of discrimination among professionals, causing 'balancing' work.

Overall, the illustration of our findings presented in Fig. 1 clarifies one of our main contributions to the ongoing debate on systems of inequality (e.g., Amis, et al., 2018, 2020; Benschop, 2021): although professionals in PSFs mostly hold a sensibility derived from direct and indirect experiences of discrimination related to ethnicity in their personal lives, the social-symbolic work performed within PSFs leads to them ultimately maintaining the status quo instead of contesting and resisting it. In our evidence, we offer various and controversial explanations for this overall result, including the fear of retaliation from those who live or witness ethnic discrimination and the

desire to perform the HR role in ways that are recognizable but not necessarily effective for the target groups.

Managerial and Practical Implications

D&I practices dedicated to ethnicity do not yet exist in Italian PSF branches in a formalized and uniform way, but they have been inspired by or sometimes based on North American ones and adapted to local context (see Online Appendix Table 1). Our findings suggest rethinking the reasons and ways these practices are designed and adopted. Meanwhile, the Italian context, described by HR professionals, is still characterized by too few non-Italian and non-Caucasian professionals, thereby confirming for many that ethnic discrimination and racism do not represent an issue at all. Thus, Italian PSF branches could combine initiatives aimed at acknowledging the worlds of concern professionals hold while hiring and sustaining the career progression of more non-Italians and non-Caucasians. Having more people 'concerned' about ethnic discrimination in these firms can help sustain the forms of work that propose alternatives to the status quo; this allows practices and their initiatives to be not just adapted but rethought *for* and *with* professionals and their experiences. This is particularly crucial in D&I units, where more non-Italian and non-Caucasian professionals should be in charge of designing and adopting new practices, which should be built on their needs and informed by their direct experiences and sensibilities. Thus, this approach entails new practices tailored to worlds of concern rather than simply adopting D&I guidelines repeatedly. For Italian branches, we also suggest specific adjustments regarding the use of the Italian language in the workplace when needed for business and relations with clients. This would help prevent professionals from contributing to their own exclusion.

Another important step is a change in the professionals' mindset regarding ethnic discrimination, i.e., rendering them more personally involved in an alliance with employees who experience ethnic discrimination. Thus, rethinking ally programs by creating occasions for professionals to share their worlds of concern could represent such a solution. These hints could accelerate a change in the local context of Italian PSF branches, inspiring institutional change for PSFs overall and finally contributing to eliminating the system of inequality of which these organizations are representative.

Limitations

A first limitation of this study is the Caucasian ethnicity of the authors. While our personal sensibilities, academic interests and critical assumptions have guided the data collection, analysis and drafting of the paper, our unconscious

biases should also be considered. Second, regarding our data collection, not every potential interviewee agreed to be interviewed or appeared interested in the topic. Future studies could thus concentrate on the work performed by professionals whose roles are, formally, ‘far’ from inequality issues (e.g., accountants, auditors). Last, we are aware that we have only discussed the partial implications of the effect of the social-symbolic work of professionals regarding the level of larger institutional actors in wider society (i.e., Italian firms, governments, and universities). Future studies could therefore collect data on the relationships among these firms, clients, governments and educational institutions to identify other forms of institutional work in PSFs and their effects.

Conclusions

Our research reveals a disheartening pattern within PSFs that is characterized by professionals often choosing to maintain the status quo to avoid confronting ethnic discrimination. Overall, they prefer to ‘keep the boat steady,’ disregarding their own personal values and sensibilities, as well as those of their coworkers. Instead, they tend to silence and transform these concerns into something that is relatable and coherent with the primary business aim of PSFs. Our evidence shines a harsh light on the transformation of individuals’ good intentions when they enter large corporations like PSFs, showing how these intentions become tainted by the relentless pursuit of profit, fueled by negative emotions, the adoption of superficial identities, and the promotion of practices that professionals may not even genuinely endorse. This is done primarily to safeguard the firm’s reputation in the eyes of stakeholders holding financial control (e.g., clients, shareholders).

While our study cannot alter the competitive dynamics to which these firms must adhere in the corporate world, it illuminates how individuals approaching such firms are open to considering social issues like ethnic discrimination as part of their professional responsibilities. Unfortunately, they are often too consumed by the demands of their careers and worried about their status to act on these intentions even when they personally experience discrimination based on their ethnicity. If large corporations and institutions genuinely pay attention to the efforts of their employees to address important issues independently, this can empower and inspire them to build more authentic relationships with their stakeholders. This, in turn, can drive the kind of meaningful change they often aspire to achieve (and sell to their clients). This authenticity can go beyond just changes within their organizations. It can also make them more attractive to sustainable and socially conscious organizations as potential clients, as well as garner the attention of governments. Consequently, these institutions may be inclined to collaborate with these

organizations and draw inspiration from their renewed dedication to social responsibility and ethical values.

Supplementary Information The online version contains supplementary material available at <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10551-024-05613-2>.

Acknowledgments We thank the editorial team and three anonymous reviewers for their thoughtful comments and suggestions throughout the review process. We would also like to express our gratitude to Thomas B. Lawrence, Nelson Phillips, and the participants of the virtual seminar on social-symbolic work held in 2022 for their supportive and inspiring feedback and conversations.

Funding Open access funding provided by Università Cattolica del Sacro Cuore within the CRUI-CARE Agreement. No funds, grants, or other support were received.

Declarations

Conflict of interest The aforementioned authors do not have any conflict of interest to declare.

Ethical Approval This research involves 36 human participants who have been asked to be interviewed by the authors. Verbal informed consent was obtained prior to the interview. Before starting the interviews, all participants were informed about the use of shared data and information for research purposes and they received assurances of anonymity and confidentiality from the research team. For this reason, in the manuscript, it is not possible to identify the participants and their firms.

Research Involving Animals

The authors also declare that this research has not involved animals.

Open Access This article is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License, which permits use, sharing, adaptation, distribution and reproduction in any medium or format, as long as you give appropriate credit to the original author(s) and the source, provide a link to the Creative Commons licence, and indicate if changes were made. The images or other third party material in this article are included in the article’s Creative Commons licence, unless indicated otherwise in a credit line to the material. If material is not included in the article’s Creative Commons licence and your intended use is not permitted by statutory regulation or exceeds the permitted use, you will need to obtain permission directly from the copyright holder. To view a copy of this licence, visit <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>.

References

- Acker, J. (2012). Gendered organizations and intersectionality. *Equality, Diversity and Inclusion*, 31(3), 214–244.
- Adib, A., & Guerrier, Y. (2003). The interlocking of gender with nationality, race, ethnicity and class. *Gender, Work & Organization*, 10(4), 413–432.
- Alvesson, M., & Robertson, M. (2006). The best and the brightest: The construction, significance and effects of elite identities in consulting firms. *Organization*, 13(2), 195–224.
- Amis, J. M., Mair, J., & Munir, K. A. (2020). The organizational reproduction of inequality. *Academy of Management Annals*, 14(1), 195–230.
- Amis, J. M., Munir, K. A., Lawrence, T. B., Hirsch, P., & McGahan, A. (2018). Inequality, institutions and organizations. *Organization Studies*, 39(9), 1131–1152.

- Atewologun, D., Sealy, R., & Vinnicombe, S. (2016). Revealing intersectional dynamics in organizations: Introducing 'intersectional identity work.' *Gender, Work & Organization*, 23(3), 223–247.
- Azab, C., & Holmqvist, J. (2022). Discrimination in services: How service recovery efforts change with customer accent. *Journal of Business Ethics*, 180(1), 355–372.
- Barker, V. (2012). Global mobility and penal order: Criminalizing migration, a view from Europe. *Sociology Compass*, 6(2), 113–121.
- Benschop, Y. (2021). Grand challenges, feminist answers. *Organization Theory*, 2(3), 1–19.
- Bolzani, D., Crivellaro, F., & Grimaldi, R. (2021). Highly skilled, yet invisible: The potential of migrant women with a STEM background in Italy between intersectional barriers and resources. *Gender, Work & Organization*, 28(6), 2132–2157.
- Boussebaa, M. (2024). Unsettling West-centrism in the study of professional service firms. *Human Relations*, 77(1), 29–52.
- Brennan, J. (2023). Diversity for justice vs diversity for performance: Philosophical and empirical tensions. *Journal of Business Ethics*, 187(3), 433–447.
- Coluzzi, P. (2008). Language planning for Italian regional languages ("dialects"). *Language Problems and Language Planning*, 32(3), 215–236.
- Cornelius, N., Lucio, M. M., Wilson, F., Gagnon, S., MacKenzie, R., & Pezet, E. (2010). Ethnicity, equality and voice. *Journal of Business Ethics*, 97(1), 1–7.
- Creed, W. D., Hudson, B. A., Okhuysen, G. A., & Smith-Crowe, K. (2022). A place in the world: Vulnerability, well-being, and the ubiquitous evaluation that animates participation in institutional processes. *Academy of Management Review*, 47(3), 358–381.
- Dobbin, F., & Kalev, A. (2017). Are diversity programs merely ceremonial? In R. Greenwood, C. Oliver, T. B. Lawrence, & R. E. Meyer (Eds.), *The Sage handbook of organizational institutionalism* (pp. 808–828). Sage.
- Eisenhardt, K. M. (1989). Building theories from case study research. *Academy of Management Review*, 14(4), 532–550.
- Empson, L., Muzio, D., Broschak, J. P., & Hinings, C. R. (2015). *The Oxford handbook of professional service firms*. Oxford University Press.
- Farkas, L. (2017). *The meaning of racial or ethnic origin in EU law: Between stereotypes and identities*. Retrieved 18th Nov 2021, from <https://op.europa.eu/en/publication-detail/-/publication/c1cf6b78-094c-11e7-8a35-01aa75ed71a1/language-en>
- Furusten, S. (2009). Management consultants as improvising agents of stability. *Scandinavian Journal of Management*, 25(3), 264–274.
- Gill, M. J. (2015). Elite identity and status anxiety: An interpretative phenomenological analysis of management consultants. *Organization*, 22(3), 306–325.
- Hastings, R. R. (2009). Diversity and inclusion are priorities for top executives, SHRM research finds. *SHRM Newsletter*.
- Hekman, D. R., Johnson, S. K., Foo, M. D., & Yang, W. (2017). Does diversity-valuing behavior result in diminished performance ratings for non-white and female leaders? *Academy of Management Journal*, 60(2), 771–797.
- Hoobler, J. M., Hu, J., & Wilson, M. (2010). Do workers who experience conflict between the work and family domains hit a "glass ceiling?" *Journal of Vocational Behavior*, 77(3), 481–494.
- Kang, S. K., DeCelles, K. A., Tilcsik, A., & Jun, S. (2016). Whitened résumés: Race and self-presentation in the labor market. *Administrative Science Quarterly*, 61(3), 469–502.
- Kramer, M. R. (2020, June). The 10 commitments companies must make to advance racial justice. *Harvard Business Review*.
- Lawrence, T. B., & Phillips, N. (2019). *Constructing organizational life: How social-symbolic work shapes selves, organizations, and institutions*. Oxford University Press.
- Leslie, L. M. (2019). Diversity initiative effectiveness: A typological theory of unintended consequences. *Academy of Management Review*, 44(3), 538–563.
- Leung, A., Zietsma, C., & Peredo, A. M. (2014). Emergent identity work and institutional change: The 'quiet' revolution of Japanese middle-class housewives. *Organization Studies*, 35(3), 423–450.
- Litvin, D. R. (2006). Diversity: Making space for a better case. In A. M. Konrad, P. Prasad, & J. K. Pringle (Eds.), *Handbook of workplace diversity* (pp. 75–94). Sage Publications Inc.
- Maguire, S., & Hardy, C. (2009). Discourse and deinstitutionalization: The decline of DDT. *Academy of Management Journal*, 52(1), 148–178.
- Martí, I., & Fernández, P. (2013). The institutional work of oppression and resistance: Learning from the Holocaust. *Organization Studies*, 34(8), 1195–1223.
- McLaren, L. M. (2003). Anti-immigrant prejudice in Europe: Contact, threat perception, and preferences for the exclusion of migrants. *Social Forces*, 81(3), 909–936.
- Murgia, A., & Poggio, B. (2014). The winding road of diversity management in Italy. In A. Klarsfeld (Ed.), *International handbook on diversity management at work* (pp. 123–136). Edward Elgar Publishing.
- Muzanhamo, P., & Chowdhury, R. (2022). A critique of vanishing voice in noncooperative spaces: The perspective of an aspirant black female intellectual activist. *Journal of Business Ethics*, 183, 15–29.
- Muzio, D., & Faulconbridge, J. (2013). The global PSF: 'One firm' models versus (Italian) distant institutionalized practices. *Organization Studies*, 34(7), 897–925.
- Noon, M. (2018). Pointless diversity training: Unconscious bias, new racism, and agency. *Work, Employment & Society*, 32(1), 198–209.
- Ozturk, M. B., & Berber, A. (2022). Racialised professionals' experiences of selective incivility in organisations: A multilevel analysis of subtle racism. *Human Relations*, 75(2), 213–239.
- Patton, M. Q. (2002). Two decades of developments in qualitative inquiry: A personal, experiential perspective. *Qualitative Social Work*, 1(3), 261–283.
- Pew Research Center. (2021). *More people globally see racial, ethnic discrimination as a serious problem in the U.S. than in their own society*. Retrieved 18th Nov 2021, from <https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2021/11/02/more-people-globally-see-racial-ethnic-discrimination-as-a-serious-problem-in-the-u-s-than-in-their-own-society/>
- Pew Research Center. (2023). *Americans are divided on whether society overlooks racial discrimination or sees it where it doesn't exist*. Retrieved 19th Oct 2023 from <https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2023/08/25/americans-are-divided-on-whether-society-overlooks-racial-discrimination-or-sees-it-where-it-doesnt-exist/>
- Phillips, N., Lawrence, T. B., & Hardy, C. (2004). Discourse and institutions. *Academy of Management Review*, 29(4), 635–652.
- Piccolini, C. (2017). *White American youth: My descent into America's most violent hate movement—And how I got out*. Hachette Books.
- Powell, W. W., & Rerup, J. A. (2017). Opening the Black Box: The Microfoundations of Institutions. In R. Greenwood, C. Oliver, T. B. Lawrence, & R. E. Meyer (Eds.), *The Sage handbook of organizational institutionalism* (pp. 311–337). Sage.
- Pratt, M. G. (2009). From the editors: For the lack of a boilerplate: Tips on writing up (and reviewing) qualitative research. *Academy of Management Journal*, 52(5), 856–862.
- Sayer, A. (2011). *Why things matter to people*. Cambridge University Press.

- Shah, S. K., & Corley, K. G. (2006). Building better theory by bridging the quantitative-qualitative divide. *Journal of Management Studies*, 43(8), 1821–1835.
- Shore, L. M., Randel, A. E., Chung, B. G., Dean, M. A., Holcombe Ehrhart, K., & Singh, G. (2011). Inclusion and diversity in work groups: A review and model for future research. *Journal of Management*, 37(4), 1262–1289.
- Sommerlad, H., & Ashley, L. (2015). Diversity and inclusion in PSFs. In L. Empson, D. Muzio, J. P. Broschak, & C. R. Hinings (Eds.), *The Oxford handbook of professional service firms* (pp. 452–475). Oxford University Press.
- Sue, D. W. (2009). Racial microaggressions. *American Psychologist*, 64(3), 220–221.
- Tarabusi, F. (2022). Exploring the local construction of migrants in multicultural Italy. *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, 48(1), 273–290.
- Taupin, B. (2012). The more things change... Institutional maintenance as justification work in the credit rating industry. *M@n@gement*, 5, 529–562.
- Tlaiss, H. A. (2015). How Islamic business ethics impact women entrepreneurs: Insights from four Arab Middle Eastern countries. *Journal of Business Ethics*, 129(4), 859–877.
- Tuckett, A. G. (2005). Rigour in qualitative research: Complexities and solutions. *Nurse Researcher*, 13(1), 29–42.
- Willmott, H. (2015). Why institutional theory cannot be critical. *Journal of Management Inquiry*, 24(1), 105–111.
- Zanoni, P., & Janssens, M. (2015). The power of diversity discourses at work. *Organization Studies*, 36(11), 1463–1483.
- Zietsma, C., & Lawrence, T. B. (2010). Institutional work in the transformation of an organizational field: The interplay of boundary work and practice work. *Administrative Science Quarterly*, 55(2), 189–221.

Publisher's Note Springer Nature remains neutral with regard to jurisdictional claims in published maps and institutional affiliations.