Can you please start with introducing yourself and telling me why you are working on this subject?

My name is Dr Joana Vassilopoulou, I work at Brunel Business School in London. I grew up in Germany, that's where I did my first degrees. I wrote my diploma dissertation about the integration of ethnic minorities in Germany. Because of that I was asked to be part of a research project, which was sponsored by the government and which evaluated the state of Diversity management for North Rhine-Westphalia. That’s how I came to the topic of diversity management. I am working on different topics since then, such as racism, racial discrimination, race and gender equality and diversity management. I do prefer an intersectional approach in general.

For example the research I did for my PHD degree, when I started the project I wanted to have an intersectional approach, I did not want to only look at ethnicity but also on other dimensions such as gender for example, but when I started my research I realised quite fast that there is, in my view, a bigger demand to focus on the dimension of ethnicity in the German context. There has been a lot of work, I don't say it's finished but there has been a lot of work on gender issues in Germany... However, I still believe that for the German context at this point of time its very important to look at ethnicity, I am sure it has something to do with my own background of course, because I was born in Germany, but my parents came for Greece so I have what German’s call a migration background. But it's not only my personal history. My work focuses mostly on ethnic minority Turks. And also currently, the Diversity management research field is dominated by native-born German, scholars... So I think it is very important to bring in an ethnic minority perspective as well. I do support this.

'I have also the ethnic minority view in my work'
For example when I conducted my doctoral research I interviewed 30 stakeholders in the Diversity management field, from which 15 are native-born Germans and 15 belong to an ethnic minority in Germany. It was not my initial idea to do that but I realised during the interview process that I get very different views on the topic from native-born Germans in the field or from somebody who has for example an Turkish background or Greek or Spanish background... I think it was a good thing to do, since I this approach allowed me to also include an ethnic minority perspective in my research, which means it's not only the dominant perspective.

It’s very important not to always talk only about the others. Very often we can find research were the dominant group talks about the others, such as for example ethnic minorities. It's very important to include both perspectives. In my work I consider both perspectives on the same topic.

Can you tell me more about this particular context in Germany, what are the specificities of managing diversity in this country?

Diversity management is a topic in Germany since the late 90's. It entered directly as a human resources management tool. In particular in regards to the management of ethnic diversity, diversity management has no human rights background or an anti-discrimination background in Germany. It's very different from the US or from the UK where you first had equal opportunities or affirmative action and topics like that and then the language moved to diversity management. In Germany you didn't have this development. Another important point is that the gender topic dominates the Diversity management debate in Germany. This happened because there was a very strong gender and feminist movement in Germany and at one point, not all of them, but some of the feminist scholars, moved to Diversity management and they transferred their ideas and notion into the Diversity management concept, so very often you can see that for example, in different programs 'MANAGING GENDER AND DIVERSITY' which is a little bit of a contradiction because gender as a dimension is already included in Diversity management. There is no particular need to highlight that but it is highlighted because the gender and feminist movement moved partially to Diversity management.

'Rerace equality is not part of Diversity management in Germany'
For example race equality is not part of Diversity management in Germany. The term doesn't exist in Germany. I had to leave the country to realise a lot of things, because when you are in the country you are in the mainstream. So you are blind in many ways. I first realised that something is wrong when I wrote my interview schedule, because I wrote the schedule first in English and then I wanted to back translate it to German and then I realised there are no matching terms. That was very interesting. Because I wanted to ask questions about race equality and then I realised 'there is no word for race equality'. How do you ask about racism? Because racism has a very different notion in Germany. There are no such things like racism at work. Racism is seen as something violent... There is no debate about racism at work, which does exist.

Do they ignore that? They don't want to see the issue?

In my research, I found, and you can also find this in the literature is that the topic of race discrimination is taboo in Germany. We don't really talk about race and racism and stuff like that. I had a lot of problems because of that during my interviews and in particular in the company for the case study, there was a lot of resistance. You don't talk about racism it's a taboo in Germany, not only a lot of terms are missing, which makes it difficult to talk about it because if you don't have a terminology, how do you address things? How do you ask? For race equality, there is no word to ask for it. It's very weird. In particular in the company, I faced a lot of resistance because of my questions. They were very defensive, very aggressive it was not a peaceful resistance. I then started to ask during the stakeholder's interviews the question 'why do you think it is taboo'? And then participants were saying: 'it's because of our past' 'because of our history, we don't talk about it'. This is one major problem in Germany the history is completely ignored, but not only the history itself is ignored, but also how the history is treated, which is nearly more important than the history itself because there are different ways of handling the history of a country. In this circumstance they chose to ignore it to make a taboo out of it. There is some literature on national guild in Germany, for example some scholars argue that this national guild which comes from the holocaust is still affecting the collective memory in Germany and its also affecting different policies decisions and so on. I think this is what you can see if you have a closer look at things. Others also say that individuals usually tend to externalise such feelings so if you confront somebody, with for some example racism, they can be reminded of the 'nazi' past and then this collective guild appears then they don't want these feelings so they just push it away. History really matters and in particular the treatment of history. It's very
important that Germany starts connecting Diversity management with history. Because right now diversity management is trapped, in history and particular in the treatment of this history. This makes dealing with race related issues very difficult in the German context.

Because of this history they don't talk about race discrimination. However, this situation can also be used to dilute race discrimination and racism at work for example. 'If you don't talk about it, then you are not doing it'

'It's very important that Germany starts connecting Diversity management with history'

What are the main challenges for the future for companies?

I have one second point, Because as I said there is no such thing like concepts for race equality and so on. For the management of ethnic diversity they draw on concepts like integration and integration stands rather for assimilation in Germany. So it's more about what the ethnic minorities have to bring in order to integrate themselves, rather than 'what the majority population has to bring' because it's also in both ways. When you look for some examples in government reports and so on, because they have annual reports on integration, only in recent ones you can see that they consider race discrimination as a problem. I think there is a slide change coming now but the debate is still not strong enough.

'We don't need equality for them, because they need help!'

And it's also racially biased; one of the larger groups in Germany is ethnic minority Turks and it is permanently argued, also in academic work that Turks are unable to integrate. I find this very interesting. I think this is racism because saying that a whole group because of their ethnicity is unable to integrate this is clear... This notion of integration in Germany is racially biased, that's why I developed the term of 'integracism'. This all concept of integration, as it is right now, stands for race equality because at the moment they only focus on lowly-skilled ethnic minority workers for example they mostly highlight
assumed deficiencies of ethnic minorities, such as for example insufficient knowledge of the local language and insufficient educational credentials. So they are saying these people need help. So we don't need equality for them, because they need help!

I don't say that there are no problems, for example some ethnic minority Turks don't have very good educational outcomes, but 10% of Turks now have university degrees, well the percentage among Germans is not much higher. You cannot just generalise them. I think they are some people who need - I wouldn't say support - I think it's wrong, because 'why do this people have this educational outcomes?' Many of them are born in Germany, how can this happen that a large group of them have so bad educational outcomes, and then, there is a lot of research about race discrimination in education which starts already in primary school. All these things remain ignored and they keep focusing on the deficiency of people in order to justify that the need for help and not equality or Diversity management. There is symbolic violence, in media you can see that in how ethnic minority Turks are presented permanently and very often in a negative and deficient way and that influence of course. For example in the companies, they were saying 'I can not employ Turks, they don't have the skills' they are not sure - for ethnic minority Turks who have university degree and who might have the skills for the job, but the perception is that they don't and they permanently reproduce this in the media and so on...

'We don't have Turks here because they don't have the qualifications that we need'

One Human Resources woman said 'We don't have Turks here because they don't have the qualifications that we need'. Another one said 'I cannot send a Turkish woman with a headscarf to a client'. Not all Turkish woman wear a headscarf, and even if, this shouldn't be a problem. But there are a lot of stereotypes and negative perceptions.