

Chapter 4

Leveraging Workforce Diversity through a Critical Examination of Intersectionalities and Divergences between Racial Minorities and Sexual Minorities

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ABSTRACT

Using a multi-disciplinary survey of educational studies, sociology, adult education, and human resources literature, this chapter explores the ways that racial minorities and sexual minorities (lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender) face oppression in organizational contexts. It examines and critiques organizational responses to diversity, and it uncovers the ways that these populations differ. Implications for diversity training programs are articulated, suggestions for training practice are offered, and recommendations for further research are provided.

INTRODUCTION

So we are working in a context of opposition and threat, the cause of which is certainly not the angles which lie between us, but rather that virulent hatred leveled against all women, people of Color, lesbians and gay men, poor people—against all of us who are seeking to examine the particulars of our lives as we resist our oppressions, moving toward coalition and effective action (Lorde, 1984, p. 128).

The phrase *workforce diversity* encompasses a broad spectrum of constructs, categories, and dimensions and it has become ubiquitous in the discourse and the practice of Human Resource and Organizational Development. Diversity represents “visible and non-visible aspects of identities by which individuals categorize themselves and others” (Ely & Thomas, 2001; Rocco, Landorf, & Delgado, 2009, p. 9). Harvey and Allard (2009) “define diversity as the ways in which people differ that may affect their organizational experience in terms of performance, motivation, communication, and inclusion” (p. 1). Issues of race,

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class, gender, able-bodiedness, sexual orientation, religion, educational attainment, marital status, culture, ethnicity, and age comprise the fundamental aspects of ways that employees differ. Some of these aspects are visible while some are more nuanced or even invisible. Understanding the social, political, legal, environmental and organizational milieu is crucial for HRD practitioners and scholars to understand when designing and conducting diversity training programs. The field of Human Resource Development has begun to explore diversity, as evidenced by single issue journals on African American women's leadership experiences (Byrd & Stanley, 2009), diversity in the HRD curriculum (McDonald & Hite, 2010), disability awareness (Roessler & Nafukho, 2010), and sexual minority issues (Rocco, Gedro, & Kormanik, 2009). In the field of HRD, the current status of both of these diversity dimensions is that they are siloed. Each has been explored, but not in relation to each other. Each of these dimensions is situated within particular historical and social contexts that run counter to the dominant narrative of equal opportunity based upon merit. There are areas where these populations converge, and there are areas where they diverge. A critical examination of both areas—of convergence and divergence—is warranted so that such teasing out and unpacking provides Human Resource Development scholars and practitioners with deeper levels of understanding of “difference” and intersectionality. Such deeper level understanding provides a framework by which more effective diversity training and education can be imagined.

PURPOSE

Minorities in the United States continue to face oppression in the United States. This oppression persists in social, legal, political, and organizational systems and it occurs because of systematic discrimination against them. McNamee (2009) defines discrimination as “a set of exclusionary

practices by which individuals and groups use their power, privilege, and prestige to define criteria of eligibility for opportunity in terms of a set of characteristics...then to exclude those who lack those characteristics” (p. 190). Three decades of affirmative action efforts and anti-discrimination activities have not closed the gap between blacks and whites, and racial inequality persists in the United States (Massey, 2007, p. 38; McNamee, 2009). Organizational America is a sub-set of wider society, and its limitations for minorities mirror the larger systems of social, legal, and political oppressions. Despite the fact that “over \$8 billion is spent annually on interventions” (Bierema, 2010, p. 566), the Equal Opportunity Commission has reported a record high 95,402 private sector discrimination charges filed in 2008 (Bierema, 2010). Sexual minority oppression exists concurrently with racial minority oppression. This chapter will use the term *sexual minority* to represent Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender (LGBT) people. Additionally, sexual minorities are those whose gender expression do not match traditionally ascribed gender roles (Gedro, 2010) and who instead dress, speak, act, and groom in ways that stray from those that are considered appropriate for men or for women.

This chapter will address the siloed nature of the dimensions of racial and sexual minorities by uncovering and exploring their intersections as well as their divergences. Each of these minority populations lacks significant representation and role models in the most senior roles of organizational America, each faces stigmatization and marginalization, and each faces overt and covert workplace discrimination. However, there are distinctions between the two populations that merit a thoughtful exploration. Diversity training has become a ubiquitous feature of organizational training efforts in the United States, yet its affects remain questionable. Bierema (2010) highlights the example of Texaco as a striking example of failed diversity efforts. Texaco hired a renowned diversity expert to conduct executive level diver-

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