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Seeing More Clearly with an Intersectionality Lens

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Intersectionality involves moving from a focus on only the experiences of majority members of social groups to better consider within social category diversity and more specifically the unique and specific experiences associated with the intersection of social categories (e.g., African-American women, older LGBT workers) (Crenshaw, 1993). In this talk I will briefly note existing research that approaches work-life conflict, balance, and engagement issues from an intersectionality lens, followed by a discussion of the benefits gained from bringing such a perspective to our work and practice. I will include specific examples of staff and faculty in academic settings to fit with the context of this conference. Before concluding, I will discuss how intersectionality relates to invisibility, authenticity, stereotyping and ambiguity.

Work-Life Research with an Intersectionality Lens

While there has been ample criticism directed at the fact that much work-life research has focused on the experiences of middle and upper middle class, younger, White, Western, heterosexual women, there are papers emerging that adopt an intersectional lens (e.g., Hamidullah, & Ruccucci, 2017; Ozbilgin, Beauregard, Tatli, & Bell, 2011; Ray & Jackson, 2013). We see scholars examining specific questions regarding work-life conflict and coping considering the intersection of: gender and religion (e.g., similarities between Australian Muslim men and women; Sav & Harris, 2013; denominational differences in work-family trade-offs across genders, Ammons & Edgell, 2007; May & Reynolds, 2018); minorities and religion (the role of religion in buffering WFC for African Americans (Henderson, 2016) and for Muslim men (Sav, Harris & Sebar, 2014); gender and life-stage (e.g., older women having greater eldercare responsibilities but generally less work-life conflict than younger women; Hill et al., 2008; Hill, Erickson, Fellows, Martinengo & Allen, 2014) as well as gender and generational cohort differences (e.g., valuing of leisure time, gender role egalitarianism; Rothrauff-Laschober & Eby, 2014); disability and life-stage intersections (e.g., earlier experiences of age-related limitations and needs for workers with physical disabilities, Cook & Shinew, 2014); and gender and sexual minority status (e.g., studies of gay adoptive fathers, Richardson, Moyer & Goldberg, 2012).

This is definitely the good news aspect; however, it is really not an occasion for large-scale celebration. Studies are still few and far between. Many provide great value through the use of qualitative approaches, providing insights into potential unique experiences and concerns of those with a particular intersected identity, but there are relatively fewer larger scale

examinations and specific tests of existing theory boundary conditions. A reader is left with a smattering of insights about particular intersections and not enough insights into how an intersectionality lens might change broader research conclusions or organizational practices.

An Intersectionality Lens as a Focus

There are several ways that bringing an intersectional lens to the conversation about work-life balance and female faculty in contexts where they are underrepresented can sharpen our focus. The first is the attention brought to *unidentified needs*. The second is a greater focus on *ignored values*. The third is an awareness of *unacknowledged conflicts*. Finally, such a lens can help to recognize *unsupportive advice*.

Unidentified needs may be the more straightforward point of conversation – senior female faculty may need more support for eldercare responsibilities, single parents may want a different level of flexibility, etc... In general, Ozbilgin et al (2011) note that when an intersectionality lens is not adopted, the “experiences of individuals with non-traditional non-work commitments” can be ignored (p185). An example would be the need for longer bereavement leave time for those with far-flung family who will travel across multiple time zones to participate in more lengthy rituals and traditions marking a revered elder’s passing. Another example provided by Cook and Shinew (2014) regards the work-leisure balance of workers with physical disabilities. They note that while work-life researchers often discuss permeability or flexibility of one’s movement between work and life domain roles and responsibilities, individuals with disabilities carry those responsibilities related to disability management across domains. For example, an individual with a disability whose partner was out of town required greater ability to work from home for both childcare and personal care assistance needs as coming into work became more challenging during those times (Cook & Sinew, 2014). In general, the need to plan ahead and/or needs for assistance and other self-care issues affect not only a worker with physical disabilities at work, but their needs and conflicts between work and life domains (e.g., going out to dinner or on a tour while at conference with colleagues), and their higher level of leisure related stress (Cook & Sinew, 2014)

Ignoring values has been the focus of considerable discussion in critiques of the work-family research literature. Gerson (2002) talked about how cultural frameworks affect understanding and choices of who is responsible for caretaking and financial providing; the added value of an intersectional lens is in appreciating and respecting different cultural frameworks rather than seeing work-family tradeoff choices as misguided. For example, several writers have noted that the traditional cultural schema for Black women is of work-life integration rather than the traditional majority cultural schema of family devotion and stay-at-home

motherhood, so the notion of work as incompatible with mothering or gender-differentiation of household tasks has historically been less prevalent (Dean, Marsh, & Landry, 2013). One of the more common examples of ignored values in the literature on intersectionality and work-life balance is religious values (e.g., a Muslim woman dealing with a complex intersection of ethnicity, religion, patriarchal values, immigrant status and gender, Ali, Malik, Pereira & Al Ariss, 2017). Another example might be the traditional Asian custom of “doing the month,” which involves rest, nutrition, and other practices designed to restore harmony after labor; while maternity leave may be seen by an organization as essentially the same thing, the pressures to answer “just a few emails” or follow-up on obligations while on leave may be counter to long-standing traditions.

Unacknowledged conflict examples are often connected to values. For example, when large extended family relationships are part of one’s life, unique stresses and demands are often unacknowledged or seen as “unnecessary conflicts” by those with a more nuclear family focus. For example, Marks et al. (2008) discuss “knocks of need” or the financial and emotional support offered to extended family and acquaintances by more economically stable members of African-American families as a both a unique stressor and an important support vis-a-vis African American identity. Another example of an unacknowledged conflict would be the challenges for gay fathers in terms of the potential extra lengths gone to in adopting as well as balancing work and family entangled with gender role norms (Richardson, Moyer & Goldberg, 2012). The broader issue of applying a singular definition of what family is rather than the varied configurations that might occur can lead to these unrecognized conflict.

Unhelpful advice and policies can be illuminated with an intersectionality lens. Jaga and Bagraim (2017) discuss how one does not skip out on or even do shortened attendance at extended family gatherings that are a weekly occurrence for Hindu Indian families. Well-meaning colleagues who advise the need for being selective in attending to such obligations are not only not recognizing a value difference, but also are also suggesting the need to subjugate aspects of one’s identity in order to be successful in a faculty role. Another example would be encouraging faculty to engage in travel to conferences, during summers, or on sabbatical to expand one’s network, without a consideration that an individual’s personal circumstances (single parenthood, family values) makes such advice blind to an individual’s important identities.

Challenges to Address

While putting the intersectionality lens on can lead to greater clarity and focus, we have to be cautious in recognizing that it is not always the best lens for the situation – like using zoom

on your camera magnifies but doesn't always produce a sharp picture or it removes the context for the subject of the photo in ways that tell less rather than more of the story. Specifically, I want to address the tensions associated with invisibility, authenticity, stereotyping, and ambiguity.

Making the Invisible Visible. Purdie-Vaughns and Eibach (2008) discussed the concept of intersectional invisibility; individuals who belong to multiple marginalized identity groups can be made socially invisible in that they are not viewed as prototypical of any group. An intersectional lens can help us make that invisible intersection visible. However, the work of Stacey Blake-Beard and others on tempered visibility shows that individuals may wish to be strategic about when they want their identity and needs visible and when they may prefer to take an under-the-radar approach (i.e., making one's voice heard all the time on every issue can not only be professionally costly but also personally exhausting; see also Comas-Diaz, 2014). We all know that underrepresented faculty get tired of being asked to be the token spokesperson for how "people with or of X" feel; we need to think about allowing individuals to allow less visibility for their identities. As one clear example, many individuals see their religious beliefs and practices as something private and not something they wish to have visible in the workplace.

Being authentic while impression managing. Employing an intersectionality lens fits with the broader goal of not just allowing but encouraging authenticity in the workplace. For individuals who feel they are categorized in ways that don't reflect their identity, recognizing the unique needs and experiences of intersected identity groups indicates a more authentic workplace. Authenticity at work has been linked to well-being (Ilies, Morgeson, & Nahrgang, 2005; Ménard & Brunet, 2011); however, the workplace – and particularly the work environment of many business schools – puts value on managing impressions well. A focus on intersectionality exposes tensions between acting authentically and managing to convey the impression expected. For example, advising an untenured female faculty member on the importance of socializing at receptions at conferences as a way of networking without acknowledging her practice of not attending social functions where alcohol is served for religious reasons (e.g., Ali et al., 2017) is prioritizing impression management over authenticity. An intersectionality lens recognizes that individuals have alternative goal hierarchies – not everyone sees self-enhancement and getting ahead at work as a higher priority than self-verification.

Stereotyping while promoting inclusion. One danger that can emerge in embracing an intersectionality lens is stereotyping those with a particular intersected identity. Hwang and

Beauregard (2015) point out how assumptions of Asian women subscribing to traditional gender roles ignores the diversity among Asian women; in seeking to recognize perspectives of ethnic minority women, the problem of stereotyping all individuals of an intersectional identity can also arise. To address this, Olson, Huffman, Leiva and Culbertson (2013) suggested examining cultural values rather than ethnicity as they did in examining work-life conflict among Hispanic American workers, showing that acculturation affected beliefs in gender role norms. Ali et al (2017) discuss this in terms of cultural hybridization or the ways in which there are recombinations of practices as individuals move across and acculturate with different cultures. Thus, just as we cannot assume that younger female faculty will necessarily have the same experiences, needs, values and conflicts as older female faculty, we need to layer that recognition onto discussions and insights regarding intersectionality (e.g., younger lesbian faculty may not have the same notions of family as older lesbian faculty).

Ambiguity when promoting inclusion. One final word of caution is in regard to allowing inclusion to breed ambiguity in policies. In using language to cover a broader range of identities and circumstances, a policy's language can become non-specific, resulting in greater uncertainty as to applicability to an individual's circumstances. For example, leaves for "non-carrying parents" could refer to males and females, hetero and homosexual employees, and birth and adoptive parents; however, individuals may not be certain if it does cover them. Also, broad, inclusive language can actually be interpreted as less supportive in its lack of recognizing specific needs. Acknowledging all potential intersected identities creates unnecessary complexity, inevitably leaves something out, and is generally unwieldy: however, sensitivity to both greater inclusiveness *and* less ambiguity is essential.

Widen the Lens to a More Inclusive Workplace

An intersectionality perspective highlights broader concerns about inclusive climates in organizations, not just specifically to work-life concerns. For example, the discriminatory attitudes of coworkers toward LGBT faculty might certainly influence spillover of work to non-work (e.g., Stavrou & Ierodiakonou, 2018), or a refusal to allow a Muslim male to negotiate his teaching schedule so as to not interfere with daily prayer times is certainly an example of broader bias (Sav, Harris & Sebar, 2014). An intersectionality lens is not just about greater attention to the work-life needs of non-majority group members: it illustrates that inclusive workplace climates are essentially a necessary supportive element in considerations of work-life issues for underrepresented groups.

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