Movements in Organizational Communication Research

Current Issues and Future Directions

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Chapter 8

Difference, Diversity, and Inclusion

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8 Difference, Diversity, and Inclusion

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Understanding difference in organizational communication requires attention to both *organizing* and *organization* (Cooren and Fairhurst 2009, Fairhurst and Putnam 2004). As such, we begin this chapter on difference, diversity, and inclusion with stories that show both how difference has mattered in our lives and how difference is a central organizing feature of society, both within and beyond the bounds of organizations. We share our stories in the spirit of critical reflexivity, a complex concept that we see as crucial to all scholarship, regardless of method. From our perspective, to engage in critical reflexivity during the research process entails, at a minimum, thinking critically about why we do the research that we do, how we shape different aspects of the research process, and who stands to gain from this research (Cunliffe 2003).

Although we believe that critical reflexivity is an integral part of the research process, we do not suggest that it requires "coming out" about everything to readers and exposing all of our vulnerabilities (Harris and Fortney 2017). In our cases, the stories that we share show how aspects of our scholarship are informed by many of our personal experiences, but they should not be taken as an exhaustive account of the ways in which our scholarship and personal experiences are intertwined.

Our Stories

Pat's Story[1]

The most important questions about difference, diversity, and inclusion first emerged through my experience with school desegregation in the U.S. Deep South as a third grader. In 1966 I was among several African American students who integrated the Atkins, Arkansas Elementary and Junior High School—the White school. In a plan for gradual integration, a few African American students had enrolled in the high school 2 years earlier, and one of my brothers and two of my sisters had been among them. My memory of the intense emotional climate of that time is firmly entrenched in my mind because of the tragic death of my 16-year-old third cousin who

had gone missing on a warm April evening in 1964. My parents and others had gathered at the two-room segregated Black school to discuss the planned integration. There was some controversy in the Black community as to whether it was safe to send the children to the White school. The reports that some White people in the town were vowing that their children "would never attend school with niggers," naturally created uneasiness and apprehension. However, most parents, including my own, felt it imperative to support the planned integration. The meeting was interrupted by someone bringing news that my cousin, Pete, was missing and that his clothes had been discovered on the banks of a nearby pond where he frequently went swimming. It was a White neighbor who used his fishing boat to assist in the search for Pete's body and subsequently dove into the pond to bring his body to shore where his parents, those who had been at the school meeting, and other townsfolk, both Black and White, stood in silent shock. In that moment the community stood together not as people divided by racial politics, but as a community connected at a profound level of humanity, understanding and compassion.

At 5 years old, I was in bed by the time my parents returned home that night. I learned of Pete's death from an older sister who awakened me as she whispered the news through her tears. In my memory of that time, the thoughts of my cousin Pete's untimely and accidental death, and the transition from my neighborhood school to the White School, trigger the same feelings of loss, uncertainty, and apprehension.

Three years later, during my first days at the White school, came the opportunity to begin working through those emotions in context. When someone came to the door of my third-grade classroom, pointing, counting, and announcing to my teacher, "Okay, you have two," I knew they were referring to my Blackness and that of the other African American third-grader in the room. And when my new White friend followed the advice of her old White friend that she shouldn't play with me, it seemed obvious that they, too, were referring to my Blackness. The confusion and hurt I felt in response to those events were real, but yet undefined. Somehow, I sensed at age eight that these (in retrospect) seemingly mundane events were signals for what this strange place represented for me: "outsider, object, Black." Yet those signals stood in such sharp contrast to what I experienced in my own familiar 8-year old world. That world was one in which I had begun to think of my family and my community as a wonderful collection of personalities; where I had come to view myself as "special" as I competed with my 12 brothers and sisters for the attention of my parents and siblings. Most of all, I had come to see life as being filled with hope and infinite possibilities. There was a sense among many of the families in my community that this generation of children would soar to new heights of achievement, and they did everything they could to ensure that their children had educational opportunities, no matter what the sacrifices.

So, in my 8-year-old mind, I had the knowledge of my concrete, lived experience grounded in life with my family and my community. And I had the reality of some intense negative emotional responses I was experiencing as I interacted with the teachers and students at the White school. Those two realities stood in stark contradiction. Out of necessity, I worked through those contradictions by developing a set of premises for which I was the reference point. I began with the answers—I *knew* who I was—the strangers in my new world had to learn who I was; and from their interactions, they obviously did not have a clue. From that personal truth, I developed a posture of perpetual questioning based on the fundamental premise that in experiencing the world, it is possible, and perhaps even probable that a particular social context will be in contradiction to my concrete experience. It is up to me to determine the salience of my concrete experience in the situation. But always, my experience gives me the vision to see the contradiction, the gaps, the unstated assumptions that make a particular social context "work" to fulfill a particular ideology or interest.

It was not until I began my doctoral work, some 20 years later, that I began to understand my early schooling and subsequent experiences within predominantly White Colleges and Universities in terms of postmodern and poststructural philosophies (Deleuze and Guattari 1987, Foucault 1995), critical organizational communication theories (Deetz 1982), and Black feminisms (Allen 1996, Collins 1991, Crenshaw 1989). These lenses helped me to understand those institutions and the larger communication landscape not as gender and race neutral, but as interactive spaces shaped by gendered, raced, and classed discourses (Parker 2005). I became interested in unmasking the negotiated organizational spaces where the structure of opportunity for everyone, including Black girls and women, is enacted in the everyday conversations among its participants (Parker 2003). I argued that in the case of African American women, these discourses are part of the larger racial, gender, and class politics informed by the reproduction of negative stereotyping of African American women in literature and film, the news media, and television "reality" shows and sitcoms (Parker 2005). These negative stereotypes inform discursive frames that influence perceptions of African American women in everyday interactions, for example, in the academy, such as those that occur among faculty, students, and administrators, in classrooms, meeting rooms, and informal interactions. It is in the context of these everyday communicative encounters, informed by an analysis of how discursive power circulates throughout them, that the potential for transformation is palpable.

From my perspective, the aim of organizational communication scholarship on difference, diversity, and inclusion is not to provide a prescription for how to navigate particular contexts, but to unmask the ways in which the politics of race, gender, class, sexuality, and other discursive

frames alternate as figure and ground in everyday social encounters. It is an unending process that, for me, is a project aimed at creating opportunities for people across contexts to see their accountability for creating a society grounded in commitments to fairness, democracy, equity and inclusion (Parker 2014, Parker et al. 2017).

Jamie's Story

My first experiences with difference, diversity, and inclusion took place in a very different setting than Pat's. Whereas Pat's story shows how race was a painfully salient aspect of growing up in the Deep South during the era of desegregation, this was not the case in the small Canadian town where I grew up, where there was little in the way of any type of diversity. In fact, the first time I was ever asked to reflect on my race was when I was 20 years old at a happy hour organized by my student association in Montréal.

"De quelle race es-tu?" a fellow student asked me. Translation: "What race are you?"

I will always remember the shock I felt when I was asked that question so nonchalantly. Interestingly, I felt then—and still do—that her question was more directed at my cultural identity than my racial identity, as we both appeared to be what would be considered "White". But at that point in my life I had never thought of myself as White—or even as having a race at all. To talk about race, I thought at the time, was racist. That was before I had learned of whiteness studies and the problematic assumptions underlying those thoughts (Ashcraft and Allen 2003).

Instead of answering her question by referring to my racial phenotype, I explained my cultural identities and upbringing: that I grew up in a small town in southwestern Ontario, Canada; that I have a French-Canadian mother from Québec and an English-Canadian father from Ontario; and that I identify with Québécois culture.

The question about race marked me as "different" and shows that my Québécois identity is not taken for granted; rather, it is something that must be accomplished through communication. It is also something that can be—and has been—contested by others. Does the fact that my mother was born in Québec, that I lived there for many years, that I'm close to my extended Québécois family, and that I identify with Québécois culture even as I now live in Texas mean that I can legitimately claim a Québécois cultural identity? Some believe so. But can I really be Québécois if only one of my parents is French-Canadian and I don't have what would be considered a typical Québécois accent when I speak French? Others don't believe so, as I am not what some call "Québécois de souche"; that is, "pure blood Québécois". As we see here, the question of who is and can be "Québécois" is inherently political and subjective, as is the question of who is or can be considered to be "White".

A few years after the incident at the happy hour, pursuing my master's degree in Communication at the Université de Montréal and my doctoral degree at the University of Colorado Boulder provided me with theoretical lenses that have helped me make sense of that experience and many others. In particular, postmodern conceptions of identity have helped me better understand the ways in which my cultural identities are fleeting, fragmented, and contested. I was also drawn very much to queer theory, which we discuss later in this chapter, because of how it resonates with the ways in which I've experienced my gender and sexual identities. For instance, I rarely see myself represented in generalized claims about "men," and have thus sought to deconstruct such claims through the lens of queer theory in some of my work (McDonald 2016). Moreover, queer theory has helped me better understand the fluid and shifting nature of my sexual identity over the course of my life, which I have written about in what started as a comprehensive exam question and culminated in an award-winning article in *Management Learning* (McDonald 2013).

Further engagement with queer theory has recently led me to problematizing the closet (Harris and McDonald 2018), a concept that has been central to my life and that we also elaborate on later in this chapter. For me, the closet has been experienced in relation to a whole host of identities and experiences. In regard to sexuality, I have experienced the closet as both someone who identifies as gay and as someone who has identified as straight. That is, there are times when I have been presumed by others to be gay when I really identified as straight and other times where I have been presumed to be straight when I actually identified as gay. Moreover, as a Canadian who now lives in the U.S. and who speaks English with an accent that is commonly interpreted as American, I have experienced the closet in relation to both my national identity and the multiple visa statuses that I held before being granted legal permanent residency in 2017. This has forced me to negotiate when, how, and if to come out as an immigrant in certain interactions, such as during job interviews or when people come to my door and ask if I would like to register to vote.

Ultimately, what I have learned from understanding my own experiences through the lens of queer theory over the years is that difference matters in ways that stable identity categories cannot always explain. This realization is what led me to develop an anti-categorical approach to difference that is rooted in queer theory (McDonald 2015). Importantly, this approach to difference is political in that it explicitly challenges the normative discourses that construct certain forms of difference as the taken-for-granted norm and anything else as deviant. My hope is that as we continue to interrogate and disrupt these normative discourses, we can work towards building organizations that are inclusive of difference in all of its forms.

Tracing the Historical Trajectory of Difference Scholarship

The stories of our personal routes to difference studies are, in some ways, revealing of the historical trajectory of difference scholarship in organizational communication studies. Our stories are a reflection of our positionalities as scholars from marginalized identity groups and they are also instructive for what they reveal about the field via the lens of the intergenerational span of our respective careers. The self-identified indigenous scholar Linda Tuhwai Smith (1999, 2007) has written extensively about the urgent and unsettled questions that indigenous scholars encounter in the academy, such as feeling the need to write in a way that is informed by, and informing of, indigenous experiences, and yet having to face resistance to advance such scholarship. Jamie, as an early career scholar, is writing at a time when critical scholarship on race, queer theory, and decolonizing methodologies are well on their way to becoming part of the mainstream in our field. On the other hand, Pat entered the field at a time when these were areas that represented "new ground." Yet, she was bolstered by the work of scholars such as Brenda J. Allen in organizational communication and Ella Bell and Stella Nkomo in management studies who were leading the way forward with groundbreaking research published in mainstream journals (Allen 1996, Bell 1990, Nkomo 1992). This in turn influenced other scholars, eventually creating a space for more groundbreaking work.

In the sections that follow, as we trace the historical trajectory of scholarship in this area, we invite you to imagine choice points where the work of difference, diversity, and inclusion might have followed an alternative trajectory, as well as places where we might begin to write-back to that history in transformative ways.

Functionalist Origins

During the first decades of the 20th century, the field of organizational communication emerged as a robust area of social science research. Influenced by advances in cognate fields of management and industrial psychology, the study of "difference" in those early days focused on the managerial control of difference and was unquestioning about the nomenclature and assumptions of positivism (Tompkins and Wanca-Thibault 2001). Consistent with variable-analytic and functionalist approaches, the focus was almost always reliant upon "an objective means of measuring the operation and consequences of an organizational communication system" (Tompkins 1967: 17–18). What is advanced in the early era of the field is an understanding of difference as an enduring feature of organizational life, but with an emphasis on managerial control and reification of the status quo. The primary concerns were with worker productivity, motivation,

and processes that contributed to the smooth flow of workplace operations and the erasure of difference that might impede those operations. Noticeably missing was a critical analysis of how power circulates via communicative processes to produce, sustain, and transform difference.

The Interpretive and Critical Turns

As discussed in earlier chapters, the field of organizational communication went through an interpretive turn in the 1980s, which broke with earlier functionalist approaches and spurred research that focused on the communicative processes through which organizational actors create meanings, cultures, and identities (Putnam and Pacanowsky 1983). By the early 1990s, the field was also going through a critical turn with increased scholarship devoted to explaining how power dynamics shape meanings, cultures, identities, and other organizational phenomena (Deetz 1992, Mumby 1993). With the interpretive and critical turns in the field, research on difference, diversity, and inclusion progressed from early top-down functionalist approaches to the current focus on bottom-up and emergent interpretive/critical/materialist frameworks (for a comprehensive review, see Parker et al. 2017). As such, key theoretical frameworks and questions guiding current issues now focus on how power circulates via communicative processes to produce, sustain, and transform difference. Within these frameworks, difference is conceptualized as a social construction that refers to how individuals differ from each other in socially significant ways, including along the lines of gender, race, class, sexuality, and ability (Allen 2011, McDonald 2015).

The turn to the field's current focus on how power relations are embedded into difference has laid the groundwork for advancing more complex approaches that make visible the multiple and interlocking systems of political, social, and cultural making. These approaches are in line with the principles of intersectionality, a concept originally developed by legal scholar Kimberlé Crenshaw (1991) to refer to the ways in which multiple forms of oppression are experienced simultaneously rather than independently. In particular, she pointed to a case in which women of color were simultaneously discriminated against on the basis of both gender and racial oppression. In this case, the experiences of these women were shaped not by gender or race alone, but by both at the same time, and thus at the intersection of both gender and race. Although Crenshaw (1991) focused on the intersections of gender and race in her original articulation of the concept, she also noted the importance of referring to additional intersections that highlight discrimination on the basis of multiple forms of difference. In this regard, Holvino (2010) suggests that intersectional research should simultaneously attend to intersections related to gender, race, class, sexuality, and nation. Importantly, she also posits that studies of intersectionality should attend to how intersections of difference simultaneously

shape both everyday organizational interactions and broader structures and ideologies. However, one of the challenges of adopting intersectional frameworks in empirical studies continues to be foregrounding particular identities and shared experiences without essentializing them and thereby negating the complexities and nuances of the intersections at stake (Harris 2015, McDonald 2015, Parker 2014).

Feminist frameworks have been central to advancing the study of difference through the lens of intersectionality. Critical/interpretive and postmodern/poststructural feminist research about difference, diversity, and inclusion focuses on communicative practices that help to construct knowledge about dominant conceptions related to difference, as well as organizational actors' diverse identities. Feminist scholarship following critical/interpretive approaches has been fundamental to studies of communicating difference and organizing. Importantly, feminists of color have critiqued the narrow focus on gender as a broad category of difference, championing intersectionality and calling on scholars to examine additional constructions (Parker and Ogilvie 1996). Allen's (1996, 1998, 2011) work in this area, which draws from feminist standpoint theory and Black feminist thought, has been particularly influential in fostering research that examines how multiple forms of difference "matter"; that is, how they act as figure and ground to influence everyday communicative experiences. Indeed, race was largely absent in organizational communication scholarship prior to her work that showed how existing research was limited by its neglect of race (Allen 1996, 1998, 2000). By neglecting race, prior scholarship had problematically assumed whiteness as an unspoken, invisible, and universal norm—a phenomenon vividly documented in Ashcraft and Allen's (2003) critical analysis of major organizational communication textbooks at the time.

Postmodern/poststructuralist feminist studies in organizational communication conceptualize gender as fluid, contingent upon dominant belief systems, sometimes contradictory, and related to current dominant constructions of femininity and masculinity (Mumby 1996). Thus, rather than viewing gender and difference as stable, binary categories, postmodern/poststructural approaches deconstruct the very notion of categories of difference (McDonald 2015). Through this deconstruction, postmodern/poststructuralist feminist studies examine how we come to *appear* different—despite the arbitrariness of identity categories and the meanings embedded into them (Ashcraft 2014). Some postmodern/poststructuralist feminist research about power and discourse also explores dialectical relationships between control and resistance to illustrate complexities of identity constructions and interactions.

Recent Developments

Today, difference scholarship is flourishing in organizational communication. Over the past decade, the field has seen the publication of several

books devoted to difference and organizing (e.g. Allen 2011, Mumby 2011b), as well as the first chapter devoted to difference and organizing in an organizational communication handbook (Parker 2014). Moreover, difference scholarship continues to populate the field's most esteemed disciplinary and interdisciplinary journals (Alvarez et al. 2015, Compton and Dougherty 2017, Eger 2018, Harris 2013, 2017, McDonald 2015, Mease 2016). While a comprehensive review of this research is outside of the purview of this chapter, we note a common trend in these studies: a constitutive view of communication. That is, communication is increasingly viewed as constituting both difference and work itself.

Viewing communication as constitutive of both difference *and* work enables us to examine the how particular meanings of difference are intertwined with meanings of work. In this regard, Ashcraft (2011) has argued that work is understood and known through difference; that is, through the gendered and raced bodies with which certain types of work are associated. Rather than focusing on questions of difference *at* work, she offers an alternative question for difference scholars to explore: "How does difference play into the organization of work in the first place?" (Ashcraft 2011: 8). This question presupposes that difference is a constitutive feature of organizing and that organizing processes cannot be fully understood without attending to difference (Mumby 2011a).

In order to theorize difference as a constitutive feature of work and organizing, Ashcraft (2013) has proposed the metaphor of the glass slipper. Just as slippers are made for particular feet but not others, she argues that work is—strategically and discursively—made for people who embody particular configurations of difference. For instance, a wealth of interdisciplinary research has shown how certain jobs (e.g. accountants, pilots, doctors) have historically been cast as within the purview of particular groups of people (e.g. White men) and outside of the purview of others (e.g. women and people of color) in order for the practitioners of these occupations to make claims regarding the value and importance of their work (Ashcraft 2007, Ashcraft and Mumby 2004, Ensmenger 2010, Kerfoot 2002, Kirkham and Loft 1993, Witz 1992). Investigating discourses about work, occupations, and difference thus enables us to examine how certain lines of work become associated with particular bodies, as well as how organizations may seek to challenge these discourses by branding currently segregated occupations (e.g. computing and information technology) as inclusive and diverse (McDonald and Kuhn 2016).

Underexplored Frameworks and Future Directions

Looking forward, we offer the following future directions for difference scholarship in organizational communication: (1) examining

underexplored intersections of difference; (2) exploring the closet metaphor; and (3) engaging more with underexplored and nontraditional theoretical frameworks, such as queer theory and postcolonial theory.

Examining Underexplored Intersections of Difference

One way of advancing difference scholarship is examining intersections of difference that have received less attention to date. Although intersectionality has long been recognized as a framework to examine the interlocking nature of multiple forms of difference, most existing empirical research that attends to intersectionality has foregrounded the intersections of gender and race (McDonald 2015). Given that gender and race are intertwined with extremely powerful systems of domination (Allen 2007), future difference research must continue to attend to these dynamics. However, there are many socially significant forms of difference that intersect with gender and race and that organizational communication researchers have been slow to explore, including, but not limited to, class, disability, nationality, citizenship status, and native language. By foregrounding these additional intersections of difference and more, we will be able to better understand the complexities and nuances of the ways in which difference shapes organizational experiences and is related to systems of privilege, domination, and oppression—which is a crucial step towards building more inclusive organizations that break down these systems.

Exploring the Closet Metaphor

Recently, organizational communication researchers have begun to explore difference through the metaphor of the closet. Although the closet is most often associated with the concealing of nonnormative sexual identities, Harris and McDonald (2018) have suggested that it can be extended to all invisible forms of difference that are subject to stigma and that require confirmation to be revealed. For instance, a special forum in *Management Communication Quarterly* on "Queering the Closet at Work" has shown how the closet metaphor can shed light on a multitude of forms of difference that shape organizational experiences and are intertwined with power and privilege, including nonnormative family structures and relationship orientations (Dixon 2018), gender identities (Eger 2018), communities of origin (Ferguson 2018), citizenship statuses (McDonald 2018), and lifestyle and health choices (Romo 2018). In this sense, the closet can draw our attention to intersections of difference that have traditionally been unexplored.

Examining the closet is consistent with the performative approach to difference that is espoused by queer theory, which we discuss in the following section.

Engaging with Queer Theory

Queer theory is a dynamic and heterogeneous body of thought that has a strong presence in communication studies but that has only recently begun to be explored by scholars of organizational communication (Harris and McDonald 2018). Drawing heavily from the work of scholars such as Judith Butler (1990), Eve Sedgwick (1990), and Michael Warner (1999), queer theory conceptualizes difference in a fluid way and as it relates to the broad concept of (hetero)normativity. As such, rather than take the existence of identity categories such as gender and sexuality for granted, queer theory examines the normative processes through which such categories are constituted. In this regard, Butler's notion of gender performativity suggests that identity categories come into existence through the performative reenactment of the normative practices associated with particular identities such as "women" and "gay" (Butler 1990). Rather than basing political claims on categories of difference, queer theory also espouses an antinormative political stance; that is, a politics of absolute recognition and celebration of difference in all of its forms (Cohen 2005, Parker 2001).

There are many ways in which queer theory can help extend difference research in organizational communication. By adopting a queer theoretical framework, we can attend to the ways in which organizations are not only inequality regimes (e.g. Acker 2006) but also normative regimes that seek to suppress difference and assimilate members into organizational cultures (Lee et al. 2008, McDonald 2015). Queer theory's anti-categorical stance toward difference and intersectionality enables us to examine intersections of difference beyond traditional categories, and thus identify coalitions between people who are very different from each other, but who share the position of being cast as nonnormative in some way (Cohen 2005, McDonald 2015).

Engaging with Postcolonial Theory

In addition to queer theory, postcolonial theory offers a helpful framework that organizational communication scholars can further explore to examine relations of difference. Although a significant body of postcolonial scholarship can be found in management and organization studies circles, organizational communication has been slower to engage with this framework (Broadfoot and Munshi 2014).

Postcolonial theory refers to a broad, heterogeneous, and interdisciplinary body of thought that is associated with the work of scholars such as Franz Fanon (1967), Edward Said (1978, 1993), and Gayatri Spivak (1988, 1999). Postcolonial scholarship is primarily concerned with examining the ways in which macro structures of power and domination that arise from historical and geopolitical arrangements shape contemporary

social relations and knowledge production (Shome and Hegde 2002). An important goal of postcolonial scholarship is to debunk Western-centric assumptions and seek social change by "challenging universalization, invoking local specificities, and problematizing the politics of knowledge production" (Pal and Buzzanell 2013: 216). Similarly, Grimes and Parker (2009) call for decolonizing organizational communication as a priority for the field.

Broadfoot and Munshi (2007) have drawn from postcolonial theory to critique the field's tendencies to rely on Eurocentric constructions, as well as the unquestioned sovereignty of Western logics in research and other disciplinary practices. They suggest that postcolonial approaches can enable organizational communication scholars to challenge the U.S. centrism and insularism of much of the field's scholarship. They identify three commitments of postcolonial organizational scholarship, each of which has a deconstructive element that challenges dominant understandings and a reconstructive element that offers new possibilities (Broadfoot and Munshi 2014).

The first postcolonial commitment is to disrupt and reimagine organizing space(s). In this regard, Broadfoot and Munshi (2014) suggest that organizational communication research has largely been confined to North American contexts and Western theoretical frameworks, as if North American organizations and Western thought represented some type of universal norm. Adopting a postcolonial theoretical stance entails examining organizing outside of hegemonic Western contexts, such as Indian call centers (Pal and Buzzanell 2008, 2013) and grassroots organizations in postconflict Liberia (Cruz 2014, 2015, 2017b). Moreover, Grimes and Parker (2009) call for scholars to focus on organizational communication as a "decolonizing project" and, as such, suggest that listening to and sharing the stories of those who are marginalized and colonized within the U.S.-European center is consistent with postcolonial work.

The second postcolonial commitment that Broadfoot and Munshi (2014) identify is resisting colonial discourse and rethinking organizing practices. As such, postcolonial work enables us to identify the Western-centric assumptions that are embedded into scholarship on topics such as career success (Hanchey and Berkelaar 2015), dirty work (Cruz 2015), and resistance (Pal and Buzzanell 2013), as well as to advance alternative understandings of these phenomena.

Lastly, Broadfoot and Munshi (2014) suggest that conducting postcolonial scholarship requires a commitment to questioning the dominant means through which we organize knowledge, and being open to alternative ways of representing knowledge. In this regard, Cruz's (2017a) poetic account of the experiences of her multiple identities—Brown, immigrant, female, and professor—offers an exemplar of how it is possible to present scholarly knowledge in nontraditional ways.

Practical Applications

Difference, diversity, and inclusion are topics that matter to everyone. As Buzzanell (Buzzanell 2018: 298) wrote in response to the recent *Management Communication Quarterly* forum on the closet, "the realization that everyone at some point in the lifespan might engage in closeting because of some non-normative characteristic, identity, or behavior makes this Forum applicable to all." Moreover, U.S. workplaces have never been so diverse and they are poised to continue to become even more so over the next several decades (Lieber 2008). Given this context, organizational communication scholarship on difference, diversity, and inclusion has important implications for practice. Indeed, we believe that one of the main goals of scholarship in this area should be to help ensure that as organizations become more diverse, they also become more inclusive of difference.

When considering the practical applications of research on difference, diversity, and inclusion, it is important to note that the word *diversity* has increasingly taken on a functionalist and managerial connotation, as is especially evident in discourse on "diversity management" (Tomlinson and Schwabenland 2010). In diversity management discourse, the words *equality* and *inclusion* seldom appear, as the focus is not explicitly on fostering greater equality or inclusion. Rather, the focus is on recognizing and valuing diversity for the avowed purpose of improving organizational performance and helping organizations become more competitive (Noon 2007, Özbilgin and Tatli 2011). This philosophy, commonly referred to as "the business case for diversity," has been critiqued on numerous grounds. For instance, emphasizing diversity can cause the goals of equality and inclusion to become overlooked since the term diversity does not necessarily invoke a commitment to action for social justice (Ahmed 2007). Moreover, Noon (2007) argues that the business case is fatally flawed because it could be interpreted as implying that if it were profitable, discrimination could be justified on economic grounds. Furthermore, he argues that the business case for diversity views diverse bodies as mere resources that can be used to achieve organizational ends, thereby circumventing what Kalonaityte (2010: 33) calls "the ethical and human side of workplace diversity."

Although we critique the business case for diversity for the reasons listed previously, research on diversity consultants has shown that it may not be advisable to dismiss it altogether. For instance, Mease (2016: 64) argues that tensions between business case arguments and equality arguments are a "constitutive feature of diversity work" that diversity consultants negotiate in everyday interactions. In line with this claim, Ahmed's (2007) study of diversity consultants at Australian universities demonstrates that either business case or equality arguments can be used strategically depending upon the audience and context. Drawing from

her work, we suggest that what is most important is that either business case or equality arguments are used reflexively by diversity consultants and other organizational members. That is, it is crucial to reflect on why particular types of arguments are being used, why they are being made, what political implications they have, and who stands to benefit from any given diversity initiative.

Another important tension that is constitutive of the work of diversity consultants consists in operationalizing diversity; that is, "delineating what groups diversity work should focus on" (Mease 2016: 68). This tension becomes particularly visible when diversity work is viewed through the lens of queer theory (Bendl et al. 2008, Bendl and Hofmann 2015). From this perspective, diversity management discourse does not just represent subjects, but actively constitutes them by hailing particular individuals as the "subjects of diversity" (Just and Christiansen 2012: 321). Thus, diversity management discourse functions to mark certain subjects as diverse and "different" from the norm, which inadvertently reifies the normative subject against which the diverse subject is cast (Bendl et al. 2008). Moreover, diversity management discourse can reify binary and stable notions of identity by assuming inherent differences between the social groups that are delineated. As such, diverse subjects can become tokens that are expected to represent the entire group to which they are hailed as belonging, whereas normative subjects are seen as representing only themselves (Gist and Hode 2017). We thus believe that diversity consultants must be reflexive about the political implications of casting certain groups within the purview of diversity management. Drawing from Just and Christiansen (2012: 331), we also suggest that diversity management discourse should "address the subjects of diversity in ways that are less productive of closure" and invite individuals to enact difference in ways that do not conform to preexisting stereotypes.

As a final practical application, we invite readers to imagine what an ideal workplace would look like for everyone. Buzzanell (2018: 298) offers this depiction of the ideal workplace, which we find particularly compelling: "A workplace in which people can be authentic about identities and behaviors important to them and/or the group to which they identify as members." We would add that the ideal workplace would be a participative space, where people throughout the organization are attuned to how power circulates to create inequities with regard to difference. Pat has coined the term *intersectional leadership* to describe critically self-reflexive organizational members, who develop the capacity to "see" inequitably derived difference and create innovative and adaptive ways of organizing for equity and inclusion (Parker 2017).

Ideal workplaces like the one we have imagined do not just naturally exist. Indeed, all organizations are communicated into existence and

(re)constituted through everyday communication practices (Brummans et al. 2014). As such, we challenge us all to communicate in ways that create organizations—including our own academic departments—that invite inclusiveness, openness, difference, and compassion.

Discussion Questions

1. What are your philosophical assumptions about difference? To what extent should categories of difference be taken-for-granted or viewed as discursive constructions?
2. What are the challenges of operationalizing intersectionality in empirical studies? What are some ways to address these challenges?
3. What is your take on the so-called "business case for diversity"? How can the business case for diversity be reconciled with commitments to equality, inclusion, and social justice?
4. How can organizational communication research on difference, diversity, and inclusion help us build more just and equitable organizations?
5. What does the ideal workplace look like to you? What are the challenges of creating this ideal workplace and what communication practices could help create it?

Note

1. A version of this story appears in: Parker, P. S. 2009. ""Always at Risk?: African American Women Faculty, Graduate Students, and Undergraduates,"" in Cleveland, D. (Ed.), *When Minorities Are Strongly Encouraged to Apply: Diversity and Affirmative Action in Higher Education*, New York, NY: Peter Lang, pp. 119–134.

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