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Working in the Margins of Critical Race Theory and HRD

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Abstract: Sixteen articles published in *Human Resource Development Quarterly* about diversity issues relating to race, gender, and women were examined through the lens of critical race theory. CRT provides a new paradigm to discuss diversity and equity in the field of human resource development.

Introduction

Diversity training is gaining a lot of attention lately. As the nature of the workforce in the United States continues to change, those charged with aiding learning in the workplace are being asked to accomplish what society has struggled with for many years. Will we have anymore success then society as a whole has had? (Rowden, 1996, p. 108)

The impact that diversity has on organizational culture, organizational and individual learning, performance management, and on succession planning is an under researched and little understood (Rowden, 1996). Human resource development (HRD) is faced with the problem of how to integrate real concerns for diversity into programs, practices, and research. Despite the prevalence of diversity initiatives, most companies have failed to achieve racial balance in their organizational structures (Cox, 1993). Current diversity initiatives are propelled not by the changing composition of the workforce but by the inability of organizations to truly integrate and use a heterogeneous workforce at all levels of the organization (Cox, 1993). Improving diversity initiatives is focused on organizations' readiness to create and sustain a diverse workforce, and to assess their current disposition to manage, teach and evaluate diversity effectively (De Muese & Hostager, 2001). Unfortunately, organizations have created a culture that is somewhere between toxic and deadly when it comes to encouraging diversity (Cox, 2001).

The paper's purpose is to examine the perspective (assumptions and paradigms) used to discuss diversity and equity in HRD using critical race theory (CRT) as a lens. CRT is concerned with transforming the relationship among race, racism, and power (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001). The four tenets of CRT are (a) racism "appears normal and natural to people in this society" (Ladson-Billings, 1999, p. 264); (b) storytelling illustrates the myths, presuppositions, and received wisdoms that make up the dominant view of race; (c) a critique of liberalism, which focuses on deliberate, incremental change in the legal system and society; and (d) the primary beneficiaries of civil rights legislation have been white women.

Research Design

Human Resource Development Quarterly was chosen to represent the field of HRD because it is considered the top journal in field. Titles and abstracts of features, articles, and forums were searched for descriptors representing race, diversity, and gender. Databases, (ERIC,

OCLC, and Article First) and hard copies were searched. Coding categories with degrees for each category were created to represent the four tenets. The coding categories are: *racism is ordinary*, *voice and storytelling*, *critique of liberalism*, and *whites as beneficiaries*. For example, the degrees used for *racism is ordinary* are: radical view, liberal view, and passive view. The radical view is marked by a considerable departure from the usual or traditional dominant view. The liberal view is not bound by authoritarianism, orthodoxy, or traditional forms of analysis. The passive view is receptive to outside impressions or influences; existing or occurring without being active, open, or directly addressing issues of racism.

Findings

The sixteen publications located fall into two major groups: diversity and race (De Meuse & Hostager, 2001; Ensher, Grant-Vallone, & Donaldson, 2001; Hanover & Cellar, 1998; Hartel, Douthitt, Hartel, & Douthitt, 1999; Wentling & Palma-Rivas, 1998; Wentling & Palma-Rivas, 2000), and gender and women (Bierema, 1996; Caputo & Cianni, 1997; Gougeon & Hutton, 1993; Kolb, 1999; Parker & Chusmir, 1992; Snyder, 1993, 1995; Spangler, 1995; Taylor-Carter, Doverspike, & Cook 1996; Wentling, 1996). The model of cultural diversity, which is based on the concept that an employee's affiliation to a specific race, gender, or ethnic group, can be analyzed on three levels- individual, intergroup, and organizational (Cox, 1993). Collectively, the publications revealed the ubiquitous nature of racism, the neutral approaches used to manage diversity initiatives, and disguised double standards.

Women are positioned in distinct latitudes below white men and this relational position shapes and sustains subordination and white privilege (Bell, 1992; Rocco & West, 1998). However, gender alone does not determine either superordinate or subordinate position. Class, ethnicity, and sexuality are also used to allocate power and sustain subordination; perceived myths and perceptions about minorities are magnified and applied to individuals (Hartel, et al., 1999). Managing diversity results in a competitive, effective and productive workforce, if true integration is enabled (Cox, 2001; Wentling & Palma-Rivas, 1998, 2000). Issues concerning race, gender, or ethnicity are collectively perceived as attitudinal and structural barriers inherent in organization, career, or individual development, are invisible. Rarely are the effects of race and racism used to examine diversity within organizations.

Diversity and Race

Diversity is viewed as something that has to be properly managed and championed after the quotas have been satisfied (Thomas, 1991). A fundamental change in the attitude and perceptions of workers may take years to nurture. The focus was on skills needed by white males to manage women and minorities and on differences between white men and others in management styles, communication styles, perception of success, level of motivation, and performance capabilities. CRT argues that these outward manifestations mask the deep fundamental roots of sexism, racism, power, and white privilege that plague our society. While these roots are invisible, they give rise to visible manifestations of racial and sexual oppression. Consequently, diversity within organizations cannot be sustained unless based on an understanding of the root causes of racism. CRT calls for systematic deconstruction of the perceptions, assumptions and paradigms that support the visible manifestations of discrimination in order to produce effective interventions. Diversity initiatives will be superficial responses to legal and social mores without efforts to make discrimination visible to those in power. Diversity initiatives that deal implicitly or explicitly with race and gender are often suspected as efforts to

sneak affirmative action in through the back door as result prevent rational consideration of diversity initiatives (Thomas, 1991). Diversity includes managing women and assimilating racialized minorities, and should include deconstructing white privilege and racist attitudes and stereotypes (Rocco & West, 1998). Managing diversity requires vision and critical reflection.

Diversity is complex yet some believe in simplistic formulas and assume that their own understanding will become better after new models, facts or theories are discovered. CRT negates this gradual approach as a result of a liberal and passive approach to the lack of diversity at all levels within U.S. organizations (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001). Researchers who tend to be unaware of the permanence and pervasiveness of racism (Bell, 1992) underestimate their own responsibility to the complexity and factuality of discrimination. This lack of awareness is a result of the power to render racism invisible and excuse racist behavior as a misguided mistake. As researchers and practitioners concerned with diversity we have a choice: we can treat racialized minority groups as if they are all the same - without proper distinction, or make visible the distinct and separate cultures summed up in a word—diversity. If we assume the first course, we risk generalization and misdiagnose of negative and positive effects of diversity efforts (Cox, 1993). However, if we take the second course—before the projected influx of women and minorities in the workforce—we may have a strategic advantage when integrating diverse groups of people.

Gender and women

Sex-based preferential treatment within organizations may have adverse effects on black and white women because of gender stereotypes (Taylor-Carter et al., 1996). The mere presence of an affirmative action program within an organization leads to the questioning of qualifications, competency, and leadership abilities of all women. Women who are selected under affirmative action policies are viewed as less competent, less qualified, and lacking leadership abilities (Taylor-Carter et al., 1996). Women recruited through affirmative action may encounter lowered self-efficacy and self-confidence. When ethnic women are beneficiaries of affirmative action policies the sex and race-based combination receives increased scrutiny. Sex is less scrutinized as the race factor takes precedence. Ethnic women are perceived as less competent and less qualified. In other words, she is merely a token taking the space of a white-qualified or unqualified male (Taylor-Carter et al., 1996).

White women get stuck in the “bulging pipeline” of middle management (Snyder, 1993) while black women do not even get there. CRT argues that minority women have to combat the notion that affirmative action was created to redress past racial discriminations. Black women are viewed as the major beneficiaries of affirmative action which is problematic for many minorities. Since the reality is that white women are the major beneficiaries of affirmative action (Ladson-Billings, 2000).

Although the publications discussed U.S. society and women generic implications and solutions are not wise. We often speak of women as if they are all the same and have the same concerns. Affirmative action effects are more problematic for black women as opposed to white women (Taylor-Carter et al., 1996). Snyder’s (1993) discussion of the glass ceiling effect typically refers to white women and their struggle to attain senior-level management as opposed to minority women. The minority version of the glass ceiling is the concrete wall which represents the absence of real change in organizations when it comes to encouraging, supporting and sustaining minority advancement to senior-level positions (Cox, 2001). Bierema (1996) offers insights on how nine elite women (nine white women and two black women) climbed the corporate ladder to success. Only two black women were represented calling attention to

implications of this research for designing career development opportunities for women of color who are underrepresented at the executive level. The mere use of the word *executive* signals the fact that Bierema's participants were predominantly white and that their strategies and ways of learning corporate culture are not generalizable to the majority of minority women. Another implication is that in order to understand and learn the nuances of corporate culture one has to be in a corporate setting which leaves out most minorities who are not represented in corporate America instead swelling the ranks of blue collar or no collar workers.

According to CRT, since the perspective of this study is that of white-executive women, the implications have no meaning except within the framework of white-women executives. Practitioners must be warned not to build a comprehensive career development program for all women based on this narrow dominant view. Unfortunately, the dominant view has been internalized by all women as the only legitimate way of learning corporate culture. Accepting this skewed perspective may further disadvantage minority women and affect them in areas such as hiring, performance appraisal, and levels of compensation (Ensher et al., 2001).

Patton (2002) reminds us that phenomena can only be understood within the context in which they are studied. Key variables such as race and gender should be isolated to assess and address specific concerns in the workplace. For example, the success and value literature suggests that women and men place different value on what "success" means (Parker & Chumir, 1992; Snyder, 1995) and use different strategies to learn the corporate culture (Bierema, 1996; Ensher et al., 2001; Snyder, 1996; Wentling, 1996). The literature on gender differences indicates that men and women have unique leadership and management styles that are equally effective (Gougeon & Hutton, 1993; Kolb, 1999; Spangler, 1995). The literature on diversity training and evaluation indicate that there are many factors or variables that determine a successful diversity program (Hanover & Cellar, 1998; Wentling & Palma-Rivas, 1998, 2000). The literature on race-based performance indicates that there are key demographics and socio-economic characteristics that determine financial success or failure (Caputo & Cianni, 1997; Taylor-Carter et al., 1996). The issues include the lack of specific group identities (i.e., race, women, Mexican) used instead of the generic word, diversity, and the ability of researchers to deconstruct the assumptions that research problems are based on.

We cannot continue to address managing and sustaining diversity as a pragmatic problem through models, dialogues and seminars while, intellectualizing the roots of these issues and the existence of power, privilege, and oppression. Acknowledging these constructs and then deconstructing them will help to affirm positive attitudes about a heterogeneous workforce and increase the credibility of organizations who are truly concerned about their role in the maintenance of the status quo.

Implications

Key areas of human resource management and development, such as recruitment and selection, compensation (Caputo & Cianni, 1997), organizational culture, and employee relations (Ensher, et al.) are affected by perceptions of diversity, race, and gender. Examining these perceptions through the lens of CRT helps to diminish (and hopefully eradicate) stereotypical attitudes about gender roles and the level of competency and qualification of women and minorities (Gougeon & Hutton, 1993; Hartel et al., 1999; Kolb, 1999; Snyder, 1993) enabling organizations to move from managing diversity to making meaningful change in behaviors and attitudes (Thomas, 1991). CRT provides a paradigm to help us recognize that power, white privilege, racial and sexual oppression are responsible for our homogenous workforce, the need

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for affirmative action policies, the glass ceiling effect, and the devaluing of core human attributes.

CRT enables adult educators and HRD professionals to acknowledge the existence and consequences of power (Schied, Carter, & Howell, 2001) which operates on several levels. Power can be used to suppress issues preventing them from coming up for decision-making; and to stop conflict, and prevent questioning of prevailing dominant ideas and practices (Schied et al., 2001). CRT views this power as enabling racism, silencing voices of non dominant members, and maintaining the status quo. A key feature of CRT, interest convergence (Delgado & Stefaniec, 2001), articulates the notion that because racism advances the interest of both white elites (materially) and the working-class (psychically), large segments of society have little incentive to eradicate it. Therefore, if HRD practitioners do not work to make the inflexible flexible, the status quo and the incentives remain the same for the dominant group and organizations will not enjoy the full productive capacity of all employees. This study offers an opportunity for HRD scholars and practitioners to reflect upon and discuss CRT and HRD.

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