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# Diversity Issues: Exploring “Critical” Through Multiple Lenses

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**Marilyn Y. Byrd<sup>1</sup>**

## **Abstract**

### **The Problem.**

Social identity diversity is a concept that links an individual to the social world and to other contexts where interactions occur. However, issues that emerge from social identity diversity may not necessarily be viewed as mono-causal, or based on a single form of difference. Because some individuals may experience simultaneously multiple forms of difference that causes oppression, frameworks are needed to critically analyze how these individuals navigate the complexities of their social identities to gain acceptance, satisfaction, and high levels of performance.

### **The Solution.**

Intersectionality will be used as an analytical tool to highlight multiple, interlocking forms of societal oppression experienced by historically marginalized groups and to serve as a means of making sense of these experiences.

### **Key Stakeholders.**

Human resource development (HRD) scholars and practitioners who are committed to social justice advocacy.

## **Keywords**

intersectionality, social identity, diversity, giving voice

The field of human resource development (HRD) has resisted discussions of diversity despite claims that diversity is a legitimate part of the field (Bierema, 2010). However, as the field continues to evolve around contemporary issues and problems that are occurring in organizational and institutional settings, it will be necessary for HRD to align itself with the discussions that emerge. The multiple ways that individuals

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experience social identity in organizational and institutional settings is one example of a contemporary issue that requires a critical line of analysis. In this article, references to organizations and institutions will refer to workplace settings.

Reicher, Spears, and Haslam (2010) describe social identity as a relational concept that links an individual to the social world and other contexts where interactions occur. Therefore, one's social identity is the "pivot between the individual and society" (p. 45). Social identity is foundational to understanding (a) who we are in terms of similarities and differences with others, (b) how shared identity leads to shared social action, and (c) how shared identity is a product of a collective history and present experiences. Broadly defined, the term *diversity* refers to the varying ways that people differ. Although the term has evolved to encompass an array of differing attributes and characteristics, diversity is commonly used to recognize groups that are marginalized based on their social identity (e.g., race, gender, ethnicity, religion, disability, age, sexual orientation). Cox (2001) asserted that diversity is the "variation of social and cultural identities among people existing together in a defined employment or market setting" (p. 4). Social and cultural identities are personal affiliations with a group (or groups) that can significantly influence or affect an individual's major life experiences (Cox, 2001). Employment and market settings are explained as organizational, institutional, social, or consumer contexts whereby one's personal or socially constructed identity influences the experience within that context.

Intersectionality is the convergence or intersection of an individual's social identities and denotes the varying ways that social identities converge to form an interdependent, interactive, dynamic, and interlocking system (Crenshaw, 1989). Intersectionality is a useful framework for critically examining and explaining the experiences of people who either by their own self-definition or by social construction are identified within more than one social category. Social identity diversity is defined as a form of difference that marginalized individuals experience as a result of intersectionality (the existence of multiple identities in one person); thereby creating multiple dynamics for these individuals in organizational and institutional settings (Byrd, 2012). For the purposes of this article, the term *social identity diversity* builds upon the social identity and diversity constructs as an emerging concept and will be used to refer to how an individual's social identity or social category influences their experiences in organizational and institutional settings. Issues that emerge from social identity diversity (e.g., racism, sexism, heterosexism, ableism, etc.) may not necessarily be viewed as mono-causal or based on a single form of difference (Crenshaw, 1989). Moreover, because some individuals may experience multiple forms of difference simultaneously that causes oppression (e.g., race *and* sexual orientation oppression; disability *and* sexual orientation oppression; race, disability, *and* sexual orientation oppression), frameworks are needed to critically analyze how these individuals navigate the complexities of their social identities to gain acceptance, satisfaction, and high levels of performance.

Indeed, intersectionality can be a complex and messy concept, particularly when applied to social identity—which is a framework in itself. However, Choo and Ferree (2010) pointed out how intersectionality provides a better understanding of "core

sociological issues, such as institutions, power relationships, culture, and interpersonal interaction” (p. 130). To achieve this understanding, this article will (a) bring about an awareness of intersectionality as a fruitful framework for explaining how social identities interact and maintain oppression and exclusion and (b) highlight the responsibility of HRD professionals within organizations and institutions to ensure environments that are respectful and socially just. The questions that drive this article are as follows: What type of policies, practices, initiatives, systems, and opportunities are in place within organizational and institutional settings that support individuals who experience oppression from multiple social identities? How does the field of HRD support these policies, practices, initiatives, systems, and opportunities?

## Defining Terms

There are a growing number of ways that people self-identify, thus creating multiple social identities. Parent, DeBlaere, and Moradi (2013) wrote that people who self-identify with or are socially assigned to specific categories have received substantial scholarly attention as individual social groups. For this reason, deconstruction of the experiences of social identity may then serve as a foundation for examining intersectionality of other social identity groups that have received less attention in the literature. Therefore, because of the numerous ways that people create social identity in the 21st century, this article focuses on the social categories of race, gender, varying non-heterosexual sexual identities, and mentioning other categories when relevant.

The term *race* is generally understood as a socially constructed category to denote differences among people and is politically sustained to assign people to categories (Banton, 2000). Gender is a biological categorization and is based on a “set of assumptions and beliefs on both individual and societal levels that affect the thoughts, feelings, behaviors, resources, and treatment of women and men” (E. L. Bell & Nkomo, 2001, p. 16). Categories of varying sexual identities are continuing to emerge based on an individual self-identification or a social assignment to a specific group or groups. Griffin (2007) wrote that the terms *lesbian*, *gay*, and *bisexual* generally refer to one’s sexual orientation and sexual identity is based on the construction of one’s self. The term *sexual minority* has emerged as an overarching term that refers to non-heterosexual people, including lesbian, gay, bisexual, transsexual, and transgender people (Rocco, Landorf, & Delgado, 2009).

## Intersectionality as a Critical Framework

With foundations in Black feminism and critical race theory (CRT), intersectionality is a critical framework for explaining how an individual can be located within various social constructs that can shape and define their experiences in organizational and institutional settings (Collins, 1990; Crenshaw, 1989; hooks, 1984; King, 1988; Sawyer, Salter, & Thoroughgood, 2013). Intersectionality denotes the multiple ways that social identities interact, and conveys the idea that everyone is positioned at the intersection of social identity structures which are subjected to multiple forms of advantage and disadvantage (Gopaldas, 2013).

Intersectionality contains a multiplier effect (King, 1988). For example, racism times sexism has the potential to create a double effect of oppression. According to Knudsen (2006), intersectionality explains the lived experiences and realities of historically marginalized groups and

how social and cultural categories intertwine . . . on multiple levels to explicate various inequalities that exist in society. They are not independent of one another but instead are interrelated forms of oppression that are manifested in multiple forms of discrimination. (p. 61)

Collins (1990) described how a hegemonic domain of power and privilege exists within organizational cultures, practices, and processes, which can operate to produce social oppression and multiple forms of discrimination.

### *An Analytical Model*

As a critical framework, intersectionality is an analytical model that social science researchers have used to highlight multiple, interlocking forms of societal oppression experienced by historically marginalized groups and to serve as a means of making sense of these experiences (Syed, 2010). For example, the critical questions that need to be answered by an above-50, Black, lesbian woman, who is qualified based on all other considerations, but is continuously overlooked for career advancement are as follows:

1. Am I being discriminated against?
2. If so, is it because of my age?
3. Or could it be because of my race?
4. Does it have anything to do with my sexuality?

Research examining the experiences of a Black lesbian woman must incorporate “an analysis of the ways that other identities interact with, and therefore qualitatively change, the experience of gender” (Warner & Shields, 2013, p. 804). Parent et al. (2013) asserted that qualitative research methods offer a more complete picture of phenomenological experiences that are related to intersectionality. Analyses using qualitative approaches are therefore central to discovering the meaning-making experiences of individuals who perceive bias or discrimination from multiple social identities. Voice is a qualitative approach helpful in using intersectionality as an analytical tool (Choo & Ferree, 2010).

### *Giving Voice as a Form of Analysis*

Giving voice derives from feminist standpoint theory (Collins, 1990). To give voice means to speak in a unique and authentic way “and jump outside the frames and systems” (p. 100) that sustain and maintain oppression. Giving voice is foundational to understanding the experiences of oppression and is the first step toward social action

within organizations (Choo & Ferree, 2010; Johnson & Thomas, 2012). Furthermore, giving voice to socially oppressed (and largely silent) groups renders the invisible visible (Alfred & Chlup, 2010).

Giving voice can be achieved through storytelling, narratives, questionnaires, and other self-reporting methods that provide an account of experiences. During the process of giving voice, individuals may express dissatisfaction, share personal incidents, and/or provide feedback. Venues for giving voice include focus groups, personal interviews, structured workshops, facilitated training programs, employee resource groups, classrooms, and other sites that allow a safe space to speak out. A safe space is an invited opportunity to speak about one's social oppression in a small setting and to offer ways to bring about social change in the system where the oppression is occurring (Collins, 1990). In the process, knowledge and insight can be gained about the experiences which could lead to improvements (and possibly transformation) within the larger organizational and/or institutional system. By using intersectionality as a framework for analysis, the experiences of individuals that identify with multiple social identities can be deconstructed and reframed. According to Collins, gaining knowledge about one's oppression is essential for deconstructing negative stereotypes and creating positive images that can help historically oppressed groups earn acceptance.

### *Analyzing Social Identity Using Intersectionality*

Intersectionality is useful in deconstructing the experiences of historically oppressed groups using qualitative approaches. For example, an intersectional lens is useful to deconstruct issues related to homophobia (Meyer, 2012). Using a qualitative approach, Meyer conducted semi-structured, in-depth interviews with lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) people to analyze the severity of their experiences with anti-queer violence. Black lesbians experienced forms of anti-queer violence differently than White lesbians or Black gay men. Another conclusion was that LGBT people experience oppression based on their sexual orientation as well as their social location (Black, Latina, or White).

Research conducted by Grant et al. (2011) found that transgenders' experiences with "discrimination in the workplace was even more pervasive, sometimes resulting in up to twice or three times the rates of various negative outcomes" (p. 51). Using survey data and personal narratives, researchers concluded that race has a multiplier effect on the experiences of transgender people that identify as Black, Latino/a, American Indian, and multiracial.

Jean-Marie, Williams, and Sherman (2009) used narratives and life stories of African American women (AAW) in higher education to examine the intersection of race, gender, and class. Although AAW are ascending to higher positions of leadership in the academy, their narratives convey the stress and negativity encountered from gendered racism to achieve those roles (Bonner, 2001; Myers, 2002). Furthermore, the intersection of race, gender, and class has the potential to disempower AAW leaders more so than their White counterparts (Byrd, 2009). Personal interviews with AAW

leaders across a variety of professional industries revealed that this group of participants experienced negative stereotyping, being excluded from social networks, and being challenged to dispel commonly held myths that are generally associated with being an African American woman.

Mehrotra (2013) drew from an intersectionality framework to explore ways that South Asian women define themselves at the juncture of race/ethnicity, gender, class, and diaspora. Using in-depth interviews, a significant finding is that these women consistently identified across dimensions of race/ethnicity. However, implications from this study suggest that intersectional analyses need to expand beyond social constructs and include dimensions such as age, context, life experiences, and transnational experiences.

Unveiling oppression through intersectionality can be a springboard for social justice advocacy. The Association for Women's Rights in Development (AWID, 2004) reported that intersectionality can provide "detailed, nuanced information and inspire activism and advocacy for equality and justice" (p. 6). If used to advocate social justice, intersectionality can be empowering and emancipatory.

### *Limitations and Complexities of Intersectionality as Critical Framework*

While intersectionality is emerging as a framework that social scientists are adapting to examine social identity, referring to intersectionality as a traditional testable theory that has core elements or variables should be avoided (Bowleg, 2012). Moreover, caution should be exercised to applying the concept as a universal or overarching application of social identity, particularly because most individuals associate themselves with some forms of intersecting identities. A college student, who is a Black male, gay, spiritual, an athlete, a veteran, has dyslexia, works full-time, is a veteran, and someone's son is an example of multiple, diverse social identities. This example illustrates how identifying simultaneously with multiple groups contributes to the complexities of intersectionality (Holdgreve-Resendez & Larkin, 2012). However, the focus of intersectionality should remain centered on the oppression of historically oppressed and marginalized groups (Bowleg, 2008).

Warner (2008) acknowledged that using intersectionality as a framework can be somewhat challenging. Furthermore, there needs to be more discussions on *how* to study and analyze intersectionality (McCall, 2005). Nonetheless, "using multidisciplinary perspectives, including women's studies, Black feminist studies, social epidemiology, sociology, critical theory, legal studies, and psychology is a signature strength of scholarship on intersectionality" (Bowleg, 2008, p. 323) which could be beneficial to advancing research, practice, and theory-building in the field of HRD.

### **Intersectionality and Social Identity Diversity: Tools for Social Justice Advocacy**

Social justice is a moral obligation that reflects the highest standard by which individuals within organizations should be treated (Mill & Bentham, 1987). Ingram and Walters (2007) defined social justice as "the conditions in society in which all members have



the same basic rights, security, opportunities, obligations, social benefits, and the way in which human rights are manifested in the everyday lives of people at every level of society” (p. 27). Social justice advocacy refers to organizing efforts by individuals or groups to bring about change within systems that sustain oppressive conditions. In organization and institutional settings, social justice advocacy is the collective engagement or collective action among individuals or groups to bring about social change.

Crenshaw (1989) said that social justice issues emerging from an individual’s multiple forms of identity call for intersectionality as a basis for meaning making and for social justice advocacy. As a response to a heightened awareness of struggles within multiple social identities and the resulting social oppression produced, social justice activists have taken action steps to bring about a transformation of the systems that sustained the oppression. Social justice activists are individuals who act as allies to historically marginalized groups. Intersectionality with roots in political activism is an appropriate framework for social justice activism. However, Crenshaw (1993) indicated that rather than focus on the negative aspects of power and domination that marginalizes people’s experiences, social justice activism should be a liberatory process that empowers people to take action against systems of dominance and voice social perceptions of social *injustice*. L. A. Bell (2007) added that theoretical foundations of social justice are needed to help explain the historical, conceptual, and contextual accounts of social oppression.

The desire for social justice is strongest among those who have experienced injustice based on the perception of more than one stigmatized identity (Swank & Fahs, 2013). Therefore, interventions are needed that will help organizations re-think and re-direct their social justice advocacy from a silo-oriented structure toward open dialogue and interventions that are structured in an understanding of how social identities operate together (African American Policy Forum, 2013). Furthermore, adding the support of allies would be an effective way to give voice to the micro- and macro-levels of social oppression that is created by social identity diversity. Allies are people from the dominant group that take deliberate, action steps to end oppressive conditions (Gedro, 2012) for people experiencing the multiple effects of racism, heterosexism, and other “isms” that prevent an individual from feeling accepted and valued.

### ***Intersectionality in Praxis: Policies, Practices, Initiatives, Systems, and Opportunities***

Using an intersectional lens to examine organizational policies, practices, initiatives, and systems is critical to effecting progressive change in the forces and structures that threaten the access to rights and opportunities. In praxis, intersectionality means thinking differently about social identity and recognizing how eliminating oppression is fundamental to the enjoyment of equality and human dignity workplace settings (Symington, 2004). Intersectionality can be reflected through action steps that an organization takes: designing or revising existing policies to include perspectives of social identity, re-thinking and modifying current practices that are exclusive of social identity, creating initiatives that are inclusive of social identity, re-evaluating the organization’s formal systems, and recognizing opportunities to give voice.

First, an organization's commitment to social identity diversity will be expressly stated in published statements such as mission, vision, and equal employment opportunity statements and its diversity and inclusion philosophy. In addition, using inclusive language in harassment and discrimination policies that protect expression of one's social identity and hold all members accountable for being respectful promotes an advocacy perspective to social identity (Congdon, 2009). 3M is exemplary for using inclusive language that recognizes gender identity and gender expression in its equal employment opportunity policy and its harassment and discrimination policies.

Second, a significant portion of the workforce is remaining past the traditional retirement age of 55 years due to either economic necessity or a sense of personal fulfillment (Grant et al., 2010). Using an intersectional lens, this is a critical issue for those above 55 years, LGBT workers in that age category combined with sexual identity and gender expression discrimination have a double negative effect when seeking to re-enter or remain in the workforce. Because current legislation, such as the Civil Rights Act of 1964, does not address sexual identity or gender expression, re-thinking hiring/recruiting practices and benefits/retirement plans play a vital role in the quality of life for older LGBT employees (Human Rights Campaign Foundation [HRC], 2012). Exemplary in this regard are nationally recognized companies such as Apple, Nike, and JP Morgan Chase that offer benefits ranging from domestic, same-sex partner health plans, retirement plans, and survivor annuities to partners of LGBT employees.

Third, intersectionality can be applied through the creation of more inclusive diversity initiatives. "In diverse *and* inclusive cultures, people are recognized as being different, yet they are also recognized and valued as equally free organizational citizens . . ." (M. P. Bell, Özbilgin, Beauregard, & Sürgevil, 2011, p. 136). For example, the interface of disability with other social identities is a critical issue often overlooked but has a powerful dimension for human rights and a social significance for inclusion (Pal, 2011). With the opening of its Flexicenter in 2011, Procter and Gamble (P&G) has created an exemplary model of an inclusive work environment for people with disabilities by increasing the number of people hired with disabilities. The People with Disabilities initiative supports P&G's diversity and inclusion mission that "everyone is valued, everyone is included" (P&G, 2013).

Fourth, intersectionality can be applied to an organization's culture to represent how behaviors and attitudes are integrated with respect and dignity to create a culture of integration (Spataro, 2005). A culture of integration supports an organizational social justice philosophy. Organizational social justice is the ideology that organizations should seek to achieve a culture whereby all individuals feel included, accepted, and respected; where human dignity and equality is practiced and upheld (Byrd, 2014). Ben & Jerry's is exemplary of an organization that has created a culture that respects all forms of social identity. Ben & Jerry's belief that "loving couples of all kinds, should be free to marry" (Ben & Jerry's, n.d.) is an example of a culture grounded in a commitment to gay rights and social justice.

Finally, through voice, intersectionality can be applied to expose forms of oppression. Rich descriptions of events highlight actors, policies, and practices that interrelate to create an oppressive event (Symington, 2004). Applying intersectionality

through voice means using personal testimonies, narratives, storytelling, and so on to learn about people's experiences. "New forms of voice, such as affinity, networking, and employee resource groups, have emerged to provide members with opportunities to network, support, exchange information and ideas with one another, and plan sponsored activities" (M. P. Bell et al., 2011, p. 134). Pricewaterhouse Coopers is exemplary in this regard for its initiatives and efforts to provide social identity groups with professional forums for learning, developing, and advancement opportunities. Establishment of a Special-Needs Caregivers Circle has provided disability and special needs professionals with a nationwide support network (Pricewaterhouse Coopers, 2013).

## Implications for the Field of HRD

While the concept of intersectionality has been studied in many other fields, conversations about intersectionality have only just begun to emerge in HRD. As practitioners and scholars of HRD who are committed to social justice, the field of HRD should be having such conversations, and an understanding of the complex processes in which identity dimensions intertwine should inform our social justice-related practices, research, and advocacy. Furthermore, HRD should begin partnering with organizations that have illustrated a commitment to social identity diversity.

As has been illustrated through the discussion of intersectionality as it relates to race, gender, and LGBT people, it is appropriate for the field of HRD to examine how social identity diversity affects "acceptance, work performance, satisfaction, or progress in an organization" (Hays-Thomas, 2004, p. 12). Applying intersectionality in HRD research and theory is fruitful for achieving this goal by re-conceptualizing ways that X, Y, or Z coalesce as X/Y or perhaps X/Y/Z (Lanehart, 2009). While diversity scholars in the field have examined issues that emerge from an individual's social identity (Bierema, 2001; Byrd, 2009; Collins, 2012; Davis, 2009; Gedro, 2012; Githens & Aragon, 2009; Kormanik, 2009; Nafukho, Roessler, & Kacirek, 2010; Rocco et al., 2009), more research is needed to inform the field of the ways that multiple social identities and categories interact and create disadvantage. Navigating the complexities of multiple forms of social identity diversity means applying intersectionality as a critical framework for analyses.

Without an understanding of the dynamic interplay of intersectionality, our efforts to change society by challenging oppression within organizations may produce unintended consequences and may even perpetuate the very system that we are trying to change. For instance, a program intended to advance or increase representation of women within a certain segment of an organization that fails to consider other dimensions of identity, such as race, may unintentionally privilege White women, while disadvantaging ethnic and racial minority women, and possibly disadvantaging ethnic and racial minorities within the organization as a whole (Boogaard & Roggeband, 2010). Therefore, the first recommendation is that HRD scholars and practitioners apply the concept of intersectionality to help reduce possible negative or unintended implications from such an intervention.

The second recommendation is for HRD practitioners and scholars to understand and be able to identify the agency in which individuals actively deploy one privileged dimension of their identity to overcome and even distance themselves from other aspects of their identity that they may perceive as holding them back (Boogaard & Roggeband, 2010). An example of this is when an individual from an ethnic identity group uses their non-immigrant status to distance themselves from immigrants of the same ethnicity in an effort to minimize disadvantage of being associated with members of that particular ethnic group (Rouse, Wilkinson, & Garand, 2010). This process operates within groups on the basis of characteristics such as skin color (among racial and ethnic groups), or motherhood status (among women), and age (in any group; Schaerer, 2010). While this may initially benefit and reduce detrimental effects to the person deploying the privileged identity dimension, it may further perpetuate the oppression of the group to which the person belongs. Therefore, we should use our training programs to promote greater awareness of intragroup bias and discrimination within organizations. At the same time, training programs that highlight the multitude of diverse identities each of us brings to the workplace can help break down the overly simplistic system that divides people on the basis of single-category membership, such as race, sex, or class.

The field of HRD can gain tremendously by a greater understanding of how intersectionality influences individuals and organizations. Research is needed in HRD using this lens. An intersectional analysis considering all categories of difference within an organization would be unwieldy (Acker, 2012). Instead, HRD could also benefit from qualitative studies that examine the intermingling of two or three dimensions of difference, such as gender and (dis)ability, or race and sexual orientation in a particular profession (Wingfield, 2009) or organization (Boogaard & Roggeband, 2010). Using vertical analysis (a tabular method used to segregate quantitative data representing varying social groups) to compare how membership in two or three dimensions of difference, such as gender and race, is experienced at different levels of an organization would also shed light on how intersectionality functions to maintain the status quo of power and privilege (Boogaard & Roggeband, 2010). Such an understanding would be aided by rich accounts of the experience from the perspective of the participant, as well as quantitative evidence to support how intersectionality is manifested in an organization's structure and compensation systems.

The third recommendation is to consider the language of diversity and its role in maintaining the hierarchies of the status quo (Bendl, Fleischmann, & Hofmann, 2009). As HRD practitioners and scholars, we should look at how the language of diversity is being used in organizations, whether it is being used in a way that is inclusive of all organizational members, and if so, is this inclusivity in alignment at all levels of the organization, or is the language of diversity used in a way that is contradictory to or in a way that perpetuates the status quo?

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