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Racial and Ethnic Diversity at an Urban University: Critical Insight from a Developmental Social Justice Perspective

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Abstract: This paper applies an integrated developmental social justice framework to an existing qualitative data set in order to inform organizational learning and training programs. We argue that this perspective challenges the unexamined and unconscious assumptions, beliefs, and values that inform the organizational behaviors of individuals, groups, and organizations within adult and higher education.

Introduction

Universities expend a considerable amount of time and resources to recruit faculty and staff of color to their campuses. Yet, when these individuals arrive they often find the campus alienating and hostile. One consequence of a perceived hostile organizational climate is an increased turnover among faculty and staff of color. For example, a recent study of the efforts of 27 private colleges and universities in California to increase the racial/ethnic diversity of their faculty found that these individuals were leaving their hiring institutions almost as fast as they were being hired (Moreno, et al., 2006). To address these problems and issues, higher education institutions have initiated a variety of approaches to assist their organizations to become more inclusive, e.g., they have hired diversity directors, formed diversity councils, provided racial-reconciliation and diversity-related workshops, etc. Although very important, these efforts not only fail to assist universities to make the required changes, they also neglect the deeper socio-cultural aspects of the climate that leave in tact the underlying conditions that support claims and counter claims of racism that exist on campuses. These underlying conditions reflect unconscious beliefs, values, and assumptions that perpetuate institutional and societal racism. When these underlying and systemic issues remain unexamined they reinforce issues of racism and make it impossible to provide an inclusive campus climate. We propose that an integrated developmental social justice framework, as applied to an existing qualitative data set, can help to inform organizational learning and training programs. We argue that this perspective challenges the unexamined and unconscious assumptions, beliefs, and values that inform the organizational behaviors of individuals, groups, and organizations within adult and higher education.

Rationale and Framework

As racially and ethnically diverse individuals and groups interact in the workplace, their culturally-informed differences tend to produce problems and issues that must be effectively addressed by the organization. Although there has been a plethora of research on faculty of color experiences on campuses, there is little research on the experiences of academic and classified staff (Kezar, 2005). In addition, most of the studies on ethnic and racial issues on higher education campuses fail to examine the below the surface (unconscious) issues such as values, assumptions, and beliefs of the individuals, groups, and the organization to uncover the hidden causes of the institutionally based race and ethnicity issues and problems that continue to exist.

In this paper we argue that a paradigm shift is needed in order to make race and ethnicity-related organizational problems more visible, available for change, and thereby more

manageable. Further, we stress the need to change these unexamined and unconscious assumptions, beliefs, and values to affect the kinds of fundamental changes required for individuals, groups, and organizations to make more informed changes within adult and higher education. Attending to the below the surface issues helps to identify, name, and address various behaviors that occur between and among the individuals and in groups and organizations. We therefore propose a developmental social justice approach, which integrates critical race theory (Ladson-Billings and Tate, 1995) action science (Argyris & Schön, 1996), and a systems psychodynamic perspective (see for example, Gould, Stapley, & Stein, 2001) to highlight and frame the issues.

Critical Race Theory (CRT) has been used to document the experiences of students and faculty of color while examining the historical effects of racism on policy in higher education institutions. CRT generally recognizes racism as a normal part of daily life in society; that is racism is so ingrained in the ideologies and assumptions that inform our political and legal structures that it is almost invisible. Through the concept of “White Privilege” critical race theorists challenge White American experience as normative and provide a perspective to examine the experiences of people of color. Many who try to make changes to alleviate or eradicate racism in higher education institutions do so by attempting to change behaviors and procedures in order to make the campus environment race-neutral or colorblind (Morfin et al., 2006). These strategies fail to deal with the micro aggressions and the hostile racial climates that students, staff, and faculty of color often face on many higher education campuses.

Action Science (AS) is a strategy for increasing the interpersonal communication skills and confidence of individuals in groups to create conditions for organizational learning. It provides a lens into the nature of diversity-related interpersonal conflict that emanate from a lack of communicative competence. Action science assists us to make sense of the defensive routines (e.g., self-censorship and face saving) that often grow out of highly inferential race-related interpersonal clashes among employees. It recognizes that when dealing with threatening issues human beings typically act in ways that inhibit the generation of valid information and that create self-sealing patterns of escalating error. Single-loop learning occurs when an organization notices errors and inconsistencies between espoused theories and its theories-in-use and attempt to correct the problem by trying to change individual and group behavior, while ignoring the underlying defensive routines that sustains racist behavior. On the other hand, double loop learning involves “questioning the role of the framing and learning systems which underlie actual goals and strategies” (<http://www.infed.org/thinkers/argyris.htm>). That is, when the organization engages in double-loop learning, it develops the ability to deal with the micro aggressions and the hostile racial climates within the institution.

A *Systems Psychodynamic* (SP) perspective (Gould, Stapley, & Stein, 2001) can assist universities to understand the hidden and unconscious assumptions and values of the organizational climate that informs individual, group and organizational behavior. That is, the SP can help the institution to understand the results of the double-loop learning. We assert that the open systems aspect of the theory allows for an examination of the structural aspects of organizational systems, which affect individuals in significant emotional and psychological ways. This perspective can therefore help to shed light on racial challenges that individuals, groups and organizations face by focusing on the unconscious processes (such as resistance, projection, denial, transference, etc.) which are the sources and consequences of the unexamined and unconscious organizational dilemmas with racial difficulties. It not only helps to uncover these unconscious elements of racism but also provides ways to address the challenges.

Methodology

The integrated developmental social justice framework is developed and used to frame and interpret the race and ethnicity diversity-related issues and concerns that exist among faculty, academic staff, and classified staff on the campus of a large (i.e., 26,000 students) urban university located in the Midwest U.S.A.; and recommend theoretically-grounded approaches to facilitate organizational learning. A critical incident survey was used to identify race and ethnicity related issues and problems among the faculty and staff of the university. The survey utilized phenomenological (Moustakas, 1994) inquiry by attempting to understand the essence of the race and ethnicity related encounters employees at the university have experienced in the context of their employment. For seven weeks, the survey was made available online to all faculty, academic staff, classified staff, and limited term employees (LTE's) at the university, and a hard copy was mailed to all employees (Martin, 2005). This study investigated the research question: Through the lens of the integrated developmental social justice framework, what types of racial and ethnic issues and concerns exist among the university's faculty and staff?

Findings and Discussion

A total of ninety-seven useable responses were reported. These responses were organized into cases. The cases were organized into three macro level themes: those that embraced diversity; neutral responses (or nothing to report); and negative or problematic issues. The largest number of respondents (i.e., 58) reported negative or problematic issues. Whether they were witnesses to, or targets of, such negative race or ethnicity related encounters; the experience greatly influenced participants' ability to work effectively on campus. These experiences were organized into several themes (Martin, 2005): racial discrimination, playing the race card, rude behavior, reverse discrimination and/or favoritism, and derogatory and/or insensitive comments.

Racial Discrimination

Eighteen respondents reported racial discrimination incidents. These included accusations of the creation of a hostile work environment because of one's racial background; occupational discrimination; racial profiling, hiring discrimination, differential reporting assignments, racist symbols, and others. Examples of some of the racial discrimination cases submitted included the following specific incidents: *After an inappropriate interaction with a team leader, an African American woman transferred to a different unit on campus; A professor was flip, arrogant, intimidating, and demeaning to African American students; A department chair resisted hiring a top-notch African American master's degree student; A European American student worker was told that she/he didn't need to report to an African American Program Assistant; An "excellent" African American Student Advisor was forced out of position by an Assistant Dean; A supervisor verbally harassed an African American staff and routinely mistreats people of color; An African American woman's resignation cited racism in the department.*

Race Card

Six respondents observed an incident that involved a race/ethnic minority "playing the race card." Playing the race card is a strategy typically employed by individuals (and groups) of color to leverage arguments, debates, and resources in intense confrontational situations. Several cases were reported in this investigation in which the respondents perceived that a colleague played the race card. Some of the reported cases included the following: *race was attributed as the primary factor in the prioritization of job assignments; a European American faculty was*

intimidated to report the behavior of disruptive African American custodians; and an older African American student attributed her classroom difficulties to racism.

Rude Behavior

Four respondents reported “rude behavior,” where individuals perceived that they were treated rudely because of their race/ethnicity.

Reverse Discrimination and/or Favoritism

Ten respondents witnessed “reverse discrimination and/or favoritism.” Racial and ethnic minorities were perceived to have been provided special treatment or privileges that were not made available to European Americans. Some of the reported incidents included the following cases: *an African American graduate student allegedly falsified records but was not reprimanded; and a European American employee was asked to change his/her racial identity.*

Derogatory and/or Insensitive Comments

Fourteen respondents reported derogatory and/or insensitive race/ethnicity related comments. These comments were sometimes uttered in a larger race/ethnic confrontation. These incidents were reported by those who were the targets of the remarks, heard the remarks in a conversation, or overheard the remarks by other employees. Some of the reported incidents included the following cases: *A faculty member was told that whites are ineffective advising students of color; Derogatory remarks by an administrative staff were made to a student worker; A frustrated telephone caller blamed the race of the receptionist; A telephone caller complained of rude treatment by an African American sounding receptionist; Administrators’ negative comments about African American students caused discomfort; A senior faculty advised that African American colleagues/administrators should not to be taken seriously; An out of control African American co-worker used vulgar language to refer to a colleague.*

Institutional responses (when they occurred) tended to focus on behavioral changes in an attempt to resolve the issues without creating a corresponding change in the work environment structurally or via interpersonal interactions. We believe that an integrated developmental social justice perspective can help to uncover both the conscious and unconscious processes at work in developing and sustaining these types of racial and ethnic issues on college campuses.

Conceptual Framework: A Developmental Social Justice Perspective

A paradigm shift is needed in both approaches to diversity issues and the research that examines the issues. To make race and ethnicity-related organizational problems visible and more amendable to change, an integrated approach that includes changes in the individual or the group along with examining systemic issues is critical. As Gloria Anzaldua (1990) reminds us, “theory produces effects that change people and the way they perceive the world (p. xxv).” Thus we need theories that will help us to interpret incidents and actions to make way for change. We therefore propose a developmental social justice approach, to highlight and frame the issues.

The traditional diversity programs employed to make changes to alleviate or eradicate racism in higher education institutions do so by attempting to change behaviors and procedures in order to make the campus environment race-neutral or colorblind (Morfin et al., 2006). Race neutral policies attempt to make race itself irrelevant so that the onus of responsibility for experiencing either success or failure falls back on the individual. In this research, the whitewashing of race that occurred as a result of pursuing such race neutral policies was evident in the way many of the individuals involved in these encounters did not view the incident as

racially significant. These strategies fail to deal with the micro aggressions and the hostile racial climates that students, staff, and faculty of color often face on many higher education campuses, resulting in what Lawrence Bobo refers to as “laissez-faire racism.”

Furthermore, many subunits of this college operated in a climate that is controlled by the governing variables of Model O-I theories-in-use (define goals and try to achieve them unilaterally; maximize winning and minimize losing; minimize expressing or generating negative feelings; be rational and minimize emotionality) (Argyris & Schön, 1996) thereby producing interpersonal relationships that are characterized by defensive routines. Many of the cases included “attributions” (i.e., high levels of inference) regarding the motives and actions of the participants and did not provide concrete examples (i.e., rung-one data) (Argyris & Schön, 1996) of alleged actions that were so demeaning and hurtful to persons of color. College administrators often enjoy a large range of discretion that allows them to apply legally and organizationally sanctioned rules, policies, and practices in ways that support their personal biases and perspectives. Therefore, several of the cases involving persons with administrative authority over persons of color demonstrate how an administrator’s behaviors could have been aligned with the school’s management protocol, but they could have been intensely focused on the employees of color in ways that both they and other observers interpreted as either racially-related harassment or abuse. These are factors for the supervisors of the offending administrators to sort out. However, due to the Model O-I theories-in-use assumptions that control the organizational environment, these supervisors were typically kept out of the information/feedback loop until the situation had reached an impasse.

In the absence of strategies that bring micro-aggressions to the surface, we can better understand why people often think that they are being inclusive when in fact the campuses remain hostile or toxic for faculty and staff of color. Double loop learning strategies examine “the uncomfortable fit between individual and organization, defensive routines that maintain hierarchical hegemony, suppress growth and stifle reflective learning and the assumptions and values that distort interaction and unconsciously guide organizational members toward maintenance of the status quo” (Bokeno, 2002, pg. 633). That is, by engaging in double-loop learning the organization can begin to both recognize and name the micro aggressions within the organizational culture systemically rather than a continued focus on individual behaviors. Further, for real change in organizations to occur, a focus on the hidden and unconscious assumptions and values of the organizational climate that informs individual, group and organizational behavior is vital. Disruptions to the organizational climate pose “great psychic challenges to their members” that require distinctive responses and appropriate conditions in order to adequately contain the profound anxieties evoked by such upheaval. In the absence of these conditions, change efforts are likely to fail in part because members will tend to employ primitive and destructive defenses to protect themselves from the painful anxieties and fears that attend disruption and turmoil ” (p. 133). Recognizing the highly emotional nature of change evoked by the growing presence of diversity on adult and higher education campuses and providing a way to help contain the destructive defensive routines that serve to inhibit double-loop learning are crucial for sustained organizational change.

Conclusion

In conclusion, most diversity training and the resultant research focuses on individual behavior and ignores the systemic nature of racial issues on campus. By examining these issues through a developmental social justice perspective, higher and adult educators can examine the

values, assumptions, and beliefs below the surface of individual, group, and organizational actions. A developmental social justice perspective helps to highlight both the socially constructed nature of racism and the resulting micro aggressions. It also provides a way, through double loop learning, to help the organization examine these micro aggressions to uncover the hidden and unconscious beliefs, assumptions, and values that underlie the policies and practices around diversity and makes them amendable to change. Third, it helps organizations recognize that even individual actions are the result of systemic issues in addition to providing a way to help members of the organization contain their anxieties while it engages in double-loop learning. Failure to consider these below the surface issues and focus the attention on race and ethnic issues serves to perpetuate the hostile and toxic climate for faculty and staff of color.

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