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Julie Gedro

Empire State College

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Resisting Dominant Narratives of Gender Roles: Lesbian Leaders in Organizational Contexts and Implications for Adult Education

Julie Gedro
Empire State College

Keywords: Lesbian, resistance, radical epistemology

Abstract: The purpose of this qualitative research project is to learn about the experiences of lesbians who are in top level leadership positions in corporate and organizational America, in order to acquire insights about how lesbians learn to resist the dominant narrative of heterosexuality and male role stereotypes. The theoretical framework of this study is a multi-disciplinary, including psychology, sociology, leadership, and queer theory.

Purpose of the Research and Theoretical Framework

Issues of lesbians in corporate America continue to lack attention in management and human resource development research. Gedro (2010, p. 561) stated that “Even though there are significant factors that distinguish the experiences of lesbians from that of gay men, and that of lesbians from heterosexual women, the fields of management, sociology, psychology, leadership, and human resource development pay them short shrift.” The persistent paucity of research on lesbians in corporate America, despite the fact that lesbians have needs for insights and career development information, and despite the fact that heterosexism and homophobia are pervasive and co-occurring phenomena in the United States, warrants exploration. This research project is intended to gather insights about lesbians and leadership in corporate America, and it will disseminate the findings in public forums across the United States, using both face to face as well as virtual meetings and presentations.

This research project is intended to gather insights about lesbians and leadership in corporate America. Issues of lesbians in corporate and organizational America continue to lack attention in adult education research. There is a persistent paucity of research on lesbians in organizational contexts. Because heterosexism and homophobia are pervasive and co-occurring phenomena in the United States, lesbians who succeed in leadership roles in organizations are very likely to have knowledge about resisting the dominant heterosexual masculine narrative. This knowledge contributes to the field of Adult Education by presenting alternative representations of leadership, and it can broader possibilities for a more democratic and inclusive society.

Research Design

The project is a qualitative research project, currently underway, consists of approximately 30 interviews of lesbians in leadership positions in corporations and organizations across the United States. Using a semi-structured interview format, I am conducting face to face and telephone interviews in major metropolitan areas. The reason these cities have been selected is to acquire geographic dispersion. The reason I have chosen large cities is to achieve an “economy of scale” because of the concentration of large companies and/or organizational
headquarters. The locations have included New York, Boston, Austin, Tampa, Chicago, San Francisco, Atlanta, Los Angeles, Colorado Springs and Washington, D.C.

**Background and Description of the Research**

Beginning with my doctoral work at the University of Georgia in the late 1990s, I realized identified the paucity of research around lesbians in organizational contexts. After I completed my doctorate and embarked upon speaking engagements in a variety of contexts including educational, business, religious and not for profit, there was often a challenge posed to me. Many times, heterosexual women would approach me and ask me what was particularly unique about the idea of lesbians in corporate America. It happened often enough that I was motivated to write a literature review in which I explored and then answered the question.

My article, “Lesbian presentations and representations of leadership, and the implications for HRD” was published in the Journal of European Industrial Training” (Gedro, 2010). In this article, I present the challenges facing all women in corporate contexts. These pressures include the difficulty of breaking through the glass ceiling into ranks of senior management; the pressure to appear attractive, and the conundrum of negotiating a feminine or masculine leadership style. That is, feminine ways of leading, which include leading in collaborating ways that nurture and attend to relationships (as opposed to attending to tasks), are celebrated. However, it is masculine ways of leading (top-down and directive, with more attention paid to tasks than to relationships) that are valued. These pressures face all women, regardless of sexual orientation. However, lesbians face additional pressures. They face organizational heterosexuality. They face the pressure of visibility and invisibility. That is, lesbians have a dubious luxury of being able to hide their lesbianism. This is a dubious luxury, because coming out represents mental health and growth. On the other hand, coming out as a lesbian presents risks, particularly for those in the senior-most positions in organizations. Lesbians face the pressure of gender expression, which means that they face the pressure of conforming to traditional (feminine) gender roles.

Following, then, the literature review that was published, I decided to conduct a one year study of lesbians in leadership, in order to address several of the questions that I posed in the implications section of that literature review. Therefore, I applied for the “Arthur Imperatore Research Grant” provided my institution, and won the grant. The grant provides one quarter release time from teaching responsibilities, and research funding. The grant lasts from July of 2010 to July of 2011.

There are six research questions:

1. Describe your educational and professional background, and your current position.
2. How would you describe your leadership style?
3. Who has/have been your role model(s)?
4. To what extent is it known that you are a lesbian?
5. Has your lesbianism impacted your effectiveness as a leader? If yes, how?
6. What are some key points you would advise a lesbian aspiring to become a senior leader in your organization, about leadership?

I have found research participants through personal acquaintances, networking, snowball sampling, and through my volunteer affiliation with the educational organization Out and Equal Workplace Advocates. Out and Equal is a not for profit, headquartered in San Francisco, that provides education and training, as well as regional networking activities, for LGBT leaders and
heterosexual allies. The first set of interviews was conducted concurrently with the 2010 Out and Equal annual conference held in Los Angeles in September. Thereafter, interviews have been conducted mostly face to face in the cities mentioned earlier in the paper. Interviews have been videotaped and audio-taped. Interview data will be transcribed, and I will analyze the data using a constant comparative method.

The organizational contexts represented by the interviewees, to date, includes: insurance, publishing, federal government, law enforcement, finance, utilities, entertainment, technology, healthcare, and manufacturing. The research participants range in age from late 30s to late 50s, and there is a variation of ethnicity and national origin among them.

After conducting all of the interviews, I will transcribe them and then conduct analysis using a constant comparative method, which looks for themes among the data. The intended outcomes of this research will address the qualitative questions that I raised (Gedro, 2011, p. 561):

The opportunities for HRD research that could address the paucity of knowledge surrounding the topic of lesbians in leadership include both quantitative as well as qualitative research. In terms of quantitative research, it could be helpful for the field to learn how many lesbians are in leadership positions: Are lesbians under-represented in corporate hierarchies, or are they present but closeted? In terms of qualitative research, it could be helpful to learn about the leadership styles of lesbians. Are there differences, and if so, what are those differences? What have lesbians learned about leadership that could benefit the research on leadership in general? Are there “lesbians’ ways of leading?” The opportunities for practice are limited, but I hope that after reading this article, HRD researchers and practitioners acquire an awareness of the pressures exerted on lesbian leaders, and understand that lesbians have to operate in a world that does not offer them specific training or education on how to negotiate through heterosexist and sexist organizational cultures.

How the Project Findings Will Be Disseminated
I will write up my findings, and then disseminate the findings in these ways:

1. Through teleconferences and videoconference sessions for lesbians across the United States (I anticipate the opportunity of using the communications and public relations capacities of Out and Equal Workplace Advocates of San Francisco to generate the invitation list. Their website is http://www.outandequal.org, and I have an established relationship with them.
2. A presentation at Empire State College’s “All College” annual conference.
3. Through the course, LGBT Issues in the Workplace, offered through the Empire State College Center for Distance Learning.
4. Implications for the Field of Adult Education Theory and Practice
The implications for the field of Adult Education include insights and awareness into modern day constructions of gender and sexuality in the form of organizational leadership. By learning about lesbian leadership experiences in organizational settings, the research will acquire
insights about gender roles, stereotypes, and resistance of hegemonic norms and expectations of those in leadership positions. The research will look for themes that address questions such as:

1. Are lesbians under-represented in corporate hierarchies, or are they present but closeted?
2. Are there differences, and if so, what are those differences?
3. What have lesbians learned about leadership that could benefit the research on leadership in general?
4. Are there ‘lesbian’ ways of leading?”

**Tentative Themes and Conclusion**

Although I have not concluded the data gathering phase, I have conducted 20 interviews at the time of this article. There are some tentative themes that are emerging from the interviews, that present a stark contrast to the themes of my doctoral dissertation (Gedro, 2000). In my doctoral dissertation, I conducted a similar study of lesbian managers, directors and executives. However, the questions were much broader. I asked the participants what they learned about success, and how they learned to become successful. The resulting themes, back then, included an emphasis on learning how to pre-screen an audience for their receptivity to one’s lesbianism. The coming out process was a major theme. Lesbians learned about successful coming out through their service on committees and groups, through their engagement with Human Resources, and through social and networking events. The focus on lesbian success, in other words, was a focus on negotiating lesbian identity. Conversely, the tentative themes of this study have little to nothing to do with the coming out process. These themes include an emphasis on authenticity, agency, and self-confidence. The participants in the study, to date, indicate a strong disinterest in closeting and rather, they indicate that being out is a matter of personal integrity. There is a variation of gender expression among participants to date. That is, some have an androgynous appearance, some have a feminine appearance, and some have a rather masculine appearance. It is premature to offer any insights about the relationship between gender expression and leadership style. By learning about the challenges and the strategies of lesbians, this research is intended to introduce a broader conversation within the field of Adult Education about possibilities of leadership as a resistance of dominant narratives of gender, gender expression, and sexual orientation.

**References**
