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Diversity and *Ressentiment* in Educating for LGBTQ-friendly Changes in a University

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Abstract: Within universities, lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ) individuals have used education to seek equitable policies and improve campus climates. In this project, I examine the approaches to diversity education by LGBTQ activists seeking domestic partner benefits within a major state university system.

Throughout the last 20 years, lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ) individuals have sought domestic partner benefits (DPBs) as part of a larger movement to make universities hospitable to all students and employees, regardless of sexual orientation or gender identity. Using the nearly 20-year effort to attain full domestic partner benefits (DPBs) within the University of Illinois system, I sought to understand “What approaches to diversity education were used to attain DPBs within this university system?”

Diversity and *Ressentiment*

The term “diversity” is contested and definitions vary. Within workplaces, it oftentimes serves as a more palatable term for Affirmative Action. In other cases, it describes a “melting pot” approach in which assimilation is sought. In this section, I describe other common perspectives on diversity education, ranging from functionalist to socially critical approaches.

Harmonious Diversity

In an increasing number of organizations placing less emphasis on normalization of diversity, the goal is to “understand differences.” Under these approaches, recognition exists that everyone is different, but the end goal is to focus on getting along. Nemetz and Christensen (1996) provide a functionalist approach to diversity in which conflict is discouraged in order to seek organizational harmony. They conclude that diversity education efforts should not result in confusion, vulnerability, or anger, but instead should result in bias reduction, harmony, inclusion legal compliance, creativity, productivity, and approval. However, the model fails to acknowledge that diversity efforts might result in “negative” responses initially before “positive” action occurs. Additionally, recognition of differences and a striving for harmony can be inadequate. There *is* real prejudice and bias that persists through individual, institutional, and structural discrimination (Pincus, 2000). Focused action is needed to overcome these barriers.

Identity-Critique Approaches

Diversity efforts sometimes emphasize education efforts that result in members of the majority feeling guilty for the injustices that have been committed. Brown (1996) explains that this can be understood through the concept of *ressentiment* in which a member of a minority group externalizes problems and seeks to transfer problems to someone else. However, members of the majority group oftentimes facilitate diversity education with this same result. Brown contends that this process results in an individualistic investment in one’s own subjugation, which fails to critique the societal structure that created this need for a focus on individual needs. In other words, she argues that the need for individuals to transfer individual problems to others has

resulted from other societal factors (e.g., capitalism, consumerism) beyond issues related to group identities based on race, gender, sexuality, or disability.

Brown (1996) acknowledges that these ideas have their limits, given our current situation. It is difficult to ignore the real historical legacy of racism, sexism, and heterosexism and pretend that they never existed. Instead, she advocates more focus on a “democratic political culture” (p. 163) that avoids the tendency toward individualized therapeutic discourse. This new political culture would focus on “desire” and “wanting” rather than on “being.” Brown contends that “being,” in which people focus on group identity and dwell on their current condition, presents a fixed position that results in the Nietzschean concept of *ressentiment* and seeks punishment. For example, a gay man dwells on the injustice inflicted upon him and wants straight people to feel guilty for these injustices. Instead, Brown advocates a position that acknowledges current location and history, but presses forward in forming coalitions that employ ideas of “want, hope, desires, dreams” (p. 166) among disparate groups.

Identity Without Ressentiment

Bramen (2002) disagrees with Brown’s perspective on *ressentiment* and views it as an attack on identity politics. In particular, she criticizes Brown for presenting the use of identity as victims’ wallowing rather than as an assertive or affirmative stance. She concludes that both Brown and the conservative right believe that “minority constituencies do not believe in healing, but instead squeeze all the pus they can from the wound” (p. 4). Bramen concludes that identity politics is not a barrier to working on common ground and that actions are needed that rethink the *universal* while not attempting to transcend *particularity*.

West (2001), in considering the African American experience, explains that the history of African American victimization cannot be ignored, as is advocated by conservatives focusing on “pulling oneself up by the bootstraps.” However, he rejects the liberal position of solely focusing on structural issues in which political solutions are the primary focus of betterment. He advocates a self-affirming confrontation of the nihilism and self-destruction that he sees in large pockets of black America. Hayes (2001) expands on those ideas by explaining that this nihilism results in *ressentiment*, of which revenge, hatred, jealousy, and spite are associated. However, *ressentiment* is broader and longer-lasting; it leads to a long-term self-poisoning attitude. The danger with *ressentiment* is that it “masks a self-imposed helplessness” (p. 250) which leads to a self-pitying rather than working toward solutions. Through vital grassroots efforts, West calls for working across racial boundaries toward progressive goals, while building on the best of identity approaches. While calling African American activists to embrace blackness, West envisions race-transcending coalitions that seek social change and avoid the risk of separatism.

When considering diversity education under conditions of guilt and *ressentiment*, it is possible to slide into the tendency to focus on individual development in which members of the majority are pushed into a self-righteous position that can result in minorities continuously doing the educating and members of the majority seeking to redeem themselves for reasons of personal development (Ellsworth, 1989). Ellsworth advocates having conversations and building coalitions in which *action* is taken among individuals who have multiple interests. In other words, most of these scholars advocate moving beyond a self-interested focus and moving toward more expansive approaches that are broadly inclusive in bringing positive changes.

Setting and Methodology

In order to understand the approaches toward diversity education and the presence of *ressentiment*, this study occurs within two primary organizations. One is a large institution and the other is a loose-knit coalition of activists. Most events occurred among trustees,

administrators, employees, and students at the University of Illinois (U of I). The U of I has three primary campuses at Chicago, Springfield, and Urbana-Champaign. Activists at Chicago and Urbana-Champaign began working for domestic partner benefits in the late 1980s. Eventually, much of this work occurred through the U of I Ad-Hoc Domestic Partner Benefits Task Force. As of March 2008, DPBs have been partially, but not fully, implemented.

This paper is part of larger study that resulted in a qualitative, historical case study (Appleby, Hunt, & Jacob, 1994; Stake, 1995) that sought to understand the long-term process of implementing DPBs within this university system. Primary data sources were 21 interviews with activists, administrators, and other decision makers, analysis of university documents and memos, and archived email correspondence from the activist listserv.

Findings

Primary findings include: (a) education about DPBs occurring against a backdrop in which the university was embroiled in a long-term, high-profile social justice issue that resulted in activists censoring their approaches to education, (b) contradictory and complicated approaches to using coalition for education efforts, and (c) success in using testimonials.

Self-Censoring of Approaches

During the same time period as the administration began taking behind-the-scenes steps to lay the groundwork for proposing DPBs to the Board, the activism and impatience on the campuses reached one of its highest points. One of the new members of the task force heavily advocated public education efforts. One of her first moves was to organize people to speak during the public comment portion of the Board meetings. After recruiting people for this task through the listserv, task force members sent a barrage of emails, such as, “I think that this is a very bad idea at this time and likely to jeopardize the work that has been done over the past ten years. Please reconsider.” After heated deliberation, the group agreed that polite speeches could be effective in persuading Board members to act. However, the initial overreaction to speaking to the Board illustrates the cautious atmosphere in which this DPB effort occurred.

During this period, the administration and Board were addressing two other larger, more visible issues. These efforts utilized tactics of nonviolent resistance and sometimes-raucous tactics. First, opponents of the Urbana campus’ Native American mascot were protesting regularly and using very heated rhetoric in addressing the Board. For example, opponents of the mascot regularly interrupted Board meetings and accused Board members of being racist. Second, members and supporters of the graduate employees union utilized similar techniques in seeking recognition. For example, they held a sit-in at the campus administration building that resulted in the building’s employees being blocked from entering.

Given this volatile context, the cautious activists may have had a reason to be patient in deliberately working with the administration, even after years of delays. There was a fear that overly aggressive tactics would result in members of the Board becoming entrenched in their positions. Former Chancellor Susan Rozen (who was opposed to the mascot) explained,

I think Illinois is a place that doesn’t like to respond to pressure. And many places are, so I don’t mean that negatively at all. But, I think, the most effective changes that I saw, happened through a kind of give and take collaborative process. So the domestic partner issue was a good example of it working well, I think, eventually.

In considering the approaches to diversity education, some members of the task force advocated behind the scenes collaboration with the administration, while others desired public education campaigns. Regarding DPBs, I found little evidence of members desiring pity from decision makers and the campus community. Instead, they wanted this policy changed.

Contradictory and Complicated Coalition Building

Throughout this effort, there were numerous examples of coalition building. Some were successful and others were not. One of the best examples was a card drive organized by the academic professional union at the Urbana campus. In my analysis, the effort was largely responsible for reinvigorating the DPB movement throughout university system after a period of stagnation. The card drive provided a mechanism through which members of the campus community could be educated about the issue. The effort spread to the Chicago campus and hundreds of cards were presented to the Board. Additionally, the effort provided visibility to the union by displaying the union's name prominently on the card, which helped the union in its effort to organize on campus. The card drive seemed to be an ideal example of coalitional efforts—a campaign for same-sex and opposite-sex benefits originating from a group working to improve working conditions for employees. Although the union provided a platform from which to work and resources for printing materials, the organizer of the card drive concluded that the effort was organized by LGBTQ individuals, with no substantial effort by others. In considering that opposite-sex benefits were eventually dropped from the DPB proposal, she said,

If you want opposite-sex domestic partner benefits, get your ass out there and work, and don't just sit there and complain. And I know that's a stupid way to drive wedges. ... To me, that was just another example of heterosexual privilege. Like, you all have the option to get married, and you may not believe in the institution of marriage. That's fine. But if you want things to be different, then work for it."

Activists became impatient at multiple points with heterosexuals who wanted opposite-sex partner benefits, but were unwilling to work for it. Activists rejected *ressentiment* by working to take action and create changes; however, there were limits to the amount of work they were willing to undertake for opposite-sex DPBs without reciprocation from heterosexuals.

Success in Using Testimonials

Testimonials served a central role in the attainment of DPBs in this university. Evidence showed that decision makers were convinced of the significance of this issue as a result of public, written, and one-on-one testimonials. I explore both the promises of testimonials, as evidenced in this study, as well as the dangers inherent in relying upon such techniques.

Queering the university space and changing minds. In universities, cerebral messages dominate the discourse. However, administrators and Board members heard a combination of rational equity/economic arguments and the use of emotion as advocates spoke publicly about the need for DPBs. As I spoke with decision makers, I was repeatedly told that the most effective arguments came as a result of LGBTQ individuals meeting with administrators and giving public comments during meetings of the Board. Personal familiarity was crucial in winning allies. However, it is also valuable to consider Raeburn's (2004) contrast between the "queers" and the "professionals" in corporations. In her study, executives happily dealt with professionals who were part of LGBTQ employee resource groups, when they considered the alternative of dealing with radical queers in the 1990s. In my interviews, decision makers repeatedly complemented DPB advocates on being professional and collaborative. In meetings of the Board, meetings with administrators, and in other conversations, advocates were perceived as respectful, poignant, and personable. Discussions with decision makers always returned to the contrast between DPB advocates and the opponents of the Native American mascot, who were perceived as raucous, brash, and disrespectful. I conclude that the mascot's opponents helped the DPB cause by allowing DPB advocates to serve as a contrasting group. The Board and administrators were

willing to engage with calm DPB supporters, when the mascot's opponents were engaging in civil disobedience and calling them "racists" during Board meetings.

In considering Hill's (1996) and Grace and Hill's (2004) ideas about initiating LGBTQ-friendly changes through adult education, I found that LGBTQ employees effectively educated Board members and administrators about the troublesome heterosexist policies they were perpetuating. Decision makers and administrators spoke with sincerity about the respect they had for the people who spoke out in support of DPBs. The act of "putting a human face" on the policy was repeatedly mentioned as being effective in changing minds. The DPB activists performed adult education through efforts that eventually brought larger societal change (Grace & Hill, 2004). This education resulted in widespread press coverage, letters to the editor, and positive support from politicians. Additionally, other universities in Illinois offered DPBs after the U of I offered them, perhaps in part because of the U of I's move to offer them first. The collective action within one institution resulted in education of multiple parties, who then took actions that affected a larger culture.

In addition to queering the spaces in which administrators and Board members were located, public proclamations of sexuality can result in a sense of camaraderie and safety for other employees who may not be out (Ward & Winstanley, 2006). Although some LGBTQ employees were not involved in the public effort, they were spurred to act in behind the scenes ways due to the queering of university space allowed by this effort. In one case, the DPB effort resulted in an employee becoming involved in the wider LGBTQ movement and in other social causes. Therefore, this queering of university spaces potentially lead to benefits beyond the LGBTQ rights movement and beyond the confines of the institution.

Becoming a spectacle. Although apparently successful, the public addressing of DPBs can be problematized by using Mayo's (2007) argument that LGBTQ people enable laziness by heterosexuals when passively presenting stories of oppression. In her critique of anti-homophobia education, Mayo explains that these sharing sessions assume that audiences have no knowledge of LGBTQ issues or heterosexism. Instead, she advocates using a method of accusation, in which others are called into accountability and spectatorship is minimized. These ideas complement Ellsworth's (1989) call for white people to stop asking people of color to continuously do the educating on issues of racism. In settings in which issues of oppression are addressed, we see endless respectful dialogue and "sharing of experiences" by oppressed individuals. After all the effort, inaction often results. An additional danger exists when considering the effects of such proclamations on one's career. For example, Taylor and Raeburn (1995) illustrate the career risks for sociologists who publicly advocate for LGBTQ issues.

When considering the DPB advocates' use of the public speaking time at Board meetings, I found that most of the speakers did engage in a public coming out. But, they also called the Board into action and oftentimes accused members of being indifferent to heterosexism. At the same time, public Board meetings are not a two-way conversation. The former VP of Administration explained that Board members almost never engage with speakers, or even comment, during the public comment session. In that sense, the LGBTQ speakers were a spectacle. Although the speakers continuously attempted to educate "unknowledgeable" decision makers about this issue, Board members continued claiming the issue was out of their hands or that more information was needed. The major exception was a new trustee, Todd Ritter, who acted quickly to pass the DPB proposal after hearing two strongly worded speeches in which one frustrated advocate accused the Board of ignoring the university nondiscrimination policy and another said the university was at risk for lawsuits and grievances. After securing passage of the DPB proposal among Board members, Ritter met with LGBTQ employees to discuss the serious

problems with DPBs. In this meeting, Ritter was presented with the significant problems faced by these employees and he was asked how he would help resolve the issues. This meeting is an example of an accusational conversation, rather than a case of LGBTQ people being the spectacle. Additionally, the interactions with Ritter displayed a call to action rather than transference of problems, as happens with *ressentiment*.

Conclusion

Throughout much of this nearly 20-year effort, activists adopted approaches like West's (2001) and Ellsworth's (1989), in building coalitions focused on action. By their very nature, efforts geared toward identity-oriented policy changes call for identity groups to call others into *action* rather than focusing on "*being*" or desiring *pity*. The more complicated task is to continue the call for action when seeking culture and climate changes after policies have changed.

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