

Critical Race Theory: Focusing the Lens on Human Resource Development

Judith D. Bernier and Tonette S. Rocco
Florida International University, USA

Abstract: The challenge that continues to face HRD is how to integrate real concerns for diversity into programs, practices, and research. Critical race theory was used as a lens to examine work on diversity published in *Human Resource Development Quarterly* (HRDQ). Eight publications were selected and analyzed.

Despite the prevalence of corporate diversity initiatives, most companies have failed to achieve racial balance in their organizational structures (Cox, 1991). Current workforce diversity initiatives are caused not by the changing composition of the workforce itself but by the inability of organizations to truly integrate and use a heterogeneous workforce at all levels of the organization (Cox, 1993). In recent years, the discussions about improving diversity initiatives have focused on organizations' readiness to create a diverse workforce, to sustain a diverse workforce, and to assess their current disposition to manage, teach and evaluate diversity effectively (DeMuese & Hostager, 2001). Unfortunately, the absence of corresponding changes in the organizations have created a culture that is somewhere between toxic and deadly when it comes to encouraging diversity (Cox, 2001). Hence, the presence of real diversity that is sustainable as a characteristic of the organization is missing. The purpose of this paper is to examine the assumptions and paradigms used to discuss diversity and equity in human resource development (HRD) using critical race theory (CRT) as a lens. *Human Resource Development Quarterly* (HRDQ) will provide a snapshot of publications on diversity in the field of HRD.

Background of Critical Race Theory

In mid-1970, Critical Race Theory (CRT) emerged as a separate entity from an earlier legal movement called critical legal studies (CLS). Critical legal studies as a movement formed around the recognition that civil rights legislation and case law was producing diminishing returns (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001). The CLS movement scrutinized legal doctrine to expose both its internal and external inconsistencies revealing ways that "legal ideology" has helped create, support, and legitimate America's present class structure (Ladson-Billings, 1999).

The CRT movement is a collection of activists and scholars interested in studying and transforming the relationship among race, racism, and power (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001). The movement highlights a creative and tension-ridden fusion of theoretical self reflection, formal innovation, radical politics, existential evaluation, reconstructive experimentation, and vocational anguish (West, 1995).

Critical race theorists contend that the principle beneficiaries of affirmative action have been Whites and the dominant majority because White women have gained employment opportunities and increased economic benefits and therefore so have the White men who are part of their families (Ladson-Billings, 2000). For this reason companies may continue to support affirmative action and in so doing they "feel good and virtuous, [and make] minorities grateful and humble" (Delgado & Stefancic, 2000, p. 398). CRT calls for us to "demystify, interrogate, and destabilize affirmative action" (Delgado & Stefancic, 2000, p. 399) creating a new model

based on respect for the worth of each individual. This radical view can assist HRD practitioners and researchers to think outside the box on issues of diversity. As Senge observes,

I find a growing number of organizational leaders who while still a minority feel they are part of a profound evolution in the nature of work as a social institution. ‘Why can’t we do good works at work?’ Asked Edward Simon President of Herman Miller, recently. ‘Business is the only institution that has a chance, as far as I can see, to fundamentally improve the injustice that exists in the world. But first, we will have to move through the barriers that are keeping us from being truly vision-led and capable of learning.’ (Senge, 1990, p. 5)

CRT is interwoven with our understanding of the racialization and marginalization of minorities within most U.S. organizations (Ladson-Billing, 1998). Although these themes are not new in and of themselves, they represent a new challenge to the existing method of conducting research and practice in HRD. The first tenet of CRT maintains that racism is ordinary and pervasive. CRT begins with the notion that racism “appears normal and natural to people in this society” (Ladson-Billings, 1999, p. 264). The second tenet employs storytelling to analyze the myths, presuppositions, and received wisdoms that make up the dominant view of race. Storytelling is also a way of infusing the voice and experience of subordinate groups into academic discourse to explain shared notions of race, racial experience and marginalization. The third tenet is a critique of liberalism implying that liberalism focuses on deliberate, incremental change in the legal system and society while CRT demands radical, systemic change. The fourth tenet argues that the primary beneficiaries of civil rights legislation have been Whites, specifically, White women.

Research Design

Human Resource Development Quarterly (HRDQ) represents HRD because it is considered the top journal in field and is sponsored by The American Society of Training and Development and the Academy of Human Resource Development. The journal publishes editorials, features, invited reactions, articles, forums, and reviews. Editorials, invited reactions and reviews were excluded. Editorials were not included because they are considered opinion pieces. Invited reactions and reviews were excluded because they are reactions to someone else’s work. Features, articles, and forum pieces were included in our review. Features and articles were included because they represent original work. Even though forum pieces were not refereed, they provide a mechanism for scholarly interaction that we felt might be important. The first year of publication was 1990; all thirteen volumes published from 1990 – 2002 were included in the search.

Locating Publications

Searches were conducted using Educational Resources Information Center (ERIC), (1989 – 2002, Vol. 1-5), and the Online Computer Library Center (OCLC) (1995- 2002, Vol. 5-13). This was necessary because not all volumes were indexed on either database. A total of 388 features, articles, and forums were found. These publications were reviewed in a systematic order. Next, a hand search was conducted of available HRDQ volumes (approximately 41 issues). The descriptors used were *multicultural*, *diversity*, *minority*, *ethnicity*, *Hispanic*, *race*, *Black*, *White*, *women*, and *gender*. These descriptors were chosen because these terms are often used in the literature to represent areas important to CRT.

Each title and abstract was searched for each descriptor. The results are for the descriptor *diversity*, one feature and three articles were found; for the descriptor *race*, one article was

found; for the descriptor *gender*, one article, one feature, and one forum piece were found; for the descriptor *women* one article was found. For the descriptors *multiculturalism*, *Black*, *White*, *minority*, *Hispanic*, and *ethnicity*, there was nothing found. The breakdown was 2 features and 6 articles; from this point on, we will refer to them as publications.

Data Collection and Thematic Analysis

To facilitate the data collection process tables were created that used coding categories based on the four tenets of CRT. Boyatzis' (1998) thematic analysis was used to analyze themes of diversity in the eight publications, which is a process for encoding qualitative information. This may be a list of themes; a complex model with themes, indicators, and qualifications that are causally related; or something between these two forms (Boyatzis, 1998). The rationale for selecting each theme became a preliminary form of analysis.

The analysis occurred in several steps: the recording of observations, second a discussion of the data sets, and third, a search for themes in the data sets. Each of us searched for themes in the data sets, then discussed and compared the themes. A theme is a pattern found in the information that at a minimum describes and organizes the possible observations and at a maximum interprets aspects of the phenomenon (Boyatzis, 1998).

After all publications had been read separately by each researcher searching for text illustrative of each category and the rationale and observations supporting each selection, a cross check was performed comparing each data set. A data set is a table with one category with all publications represented. Together, the researchers examined the data sets produced by the each other to ensure consistency in the process. This was done once early in the process and when inconsistencies arose the analysis was redone.

Findings

In examining the literature on diversity published in HRDQ, three main themes emerged. First, in the United States women are positioned in particular and distinct latitudes below White men and it is this relational position that shapes and sustains subordination and White privilege (Bell, 1992; Rocco & West, 1998 & Rothenberg, 2001). However, gender alone does not determine either superordinate or subordinate position. Class, ethnicity, and sexuality are also used to allocate power. Second, when perceived myths and perceptions are included in performance evaluations, dissimilarities across race, gender, and class are often magnified and broadly applied to the groups (Hartel, Douthitt, & Hartel, 1999). Third, managing diversity results in a competitive, effective and a productive workforce, if true integration is enabled (Wentling & Palma-Rivas 2000; Cox 2001). Issues concerning race, gender or ethnicity are collectively perceived as attitudinal and structural barriers that need deconstructing through the objectives of organization development, career development, and/or individual development. The following paragraphs will discuss the issues of career development and artificial barriers; program planning and workplace diversity initiatives; and performance evaluations and social constructs that intersect the three themes.

Career Development and Artificial Barriers

In the United States, artificial structures based on attitudinal and structural barriers have remained relatively impenetrable for women and racialized-minorities (Thomas, 1991; Bell 1992; Neff 2001; Rothenberg, 2001). There are several unique factors that affect gender and race. These factors can be analyzed at three levels- individual, interpersonal, and organizational (Synder, 1993). At the individual level, women and minorities are often assigned misattributes that limit their career and professional advancement. There is no evidence that women are not

equally open to transfers and that ethnic minorities are not interested in senior level positions. The most effective forms of social control are always invisible. At the interpersonal level, the lack of role models and mentors within an organization serve as constant reminder that upward mobility is not unattainable. More effective by far are the beliefs and attitudes a society fosters to rationalize and reinforce prevailing distribution of power and opportunity (Bell, 1992). It is at this level that stereotypes and hierarchies play an important role in constructing barriers. At the organizational level, stereotypes and misperceptions are transmitted through societal norms thus appearing natural and inevitable at every level rather than arbitrary and alterable (Rothenberg, 2001).

Program Planning and Workplace Diversity Initiatives

The dilemma facing workplace diversity initiatives is the ubiquitous nature of racism and stereotypical behavior. As old social constructs are deconstructed, new social constructs are forming new foundations and altering realities. There are time lags between organizations, society, and research about how to manage diversity and how to stay ahead (Synder, 1993). Valuing diversity looks very different at many organizations (Wentling & Palma-Rivas, 2000). Some organizations value diversity by employing and retaining many minorities, but fail to develop and promote them through the ranks of the organization. Other organizations value diversity by employing the few minorities and promoting only one or two to top senior levels as tokens or the result -end product of diversity initiatives. Essentially, a diverse workforce should foster productivity, effectiveness, and high levels of competition. However, the process of managing diversity has been both intuitive and neutral, dismissing the positive impact and opportunities of a diverse workforce (Thomas, 1991). Whether diversity proves positive or negative will be a function of the organizational environment, but in any event, it is not a neutral or intuitive process. By focusing the lens of CRT on human resource development, the challenges are to deconstruct and redefine the normalcy of social norms and to construct new realities that are truly consensual.

Performance Evaluations and Social Constructs

The problem faced by most minorities is that their performance criteria are often different from that of white men. These criteria are often disguised as standard or gender- race- neutral principles (Bell, 1992; Rothenberg, 2001). In a White- male-centered world, one in which most policies and practices are organized around the male experience, the unique characteristics of women and minorities are perceived as core deficiencies. These hidden standards in performance evaluation, policies and practices support the institutional privileging of the dominant group's perspective and experience. If the primary function of HRD is to improve/enhance performance through learning and measurable out-comes, then learning objectives with disguised standards at its core, will inadvertently perpetuate the status quo and minimize marginalized groups' voices. However, if self- reporting is used as a storytelling instrument, it can be a powerful tool for HRD practitioners and researchers infusing the voices and experiences of marginalized groups into organizational processes.

Implications for the HRD Field

In this paper we have introduced the notion of CRT as an analytical framework for diversity initiatives, practice, and research. Diversity management is not just changing the composition of the workforce. Rather, diversity initiatives that command true integration of a heterogeneous workforce at all levels of the organization should include other inputs in the system (Cox, 1993). Furthermore, diversity initiatives require procedural fairness and an accurate

diagnosis of diversity issues. We hope that HRD would use the ideas of CRT: a) to understand issues of workplace dynamics, b) to acknowledge the importance recruitment and selection, c) to ensure fairness when utilizing developmental tools such as mentoring, coaching, and job rotation programs.

Applying CRT to HRD is potentially more useful than other critical frameworks. For instance, when HRD practitioners “understand how a regime of White supremacy and its subordination of people of color” (Crenshaw, Gotanda, Peller, & Thomas, 1995, xiii) is maintained through the law (particularly civil rights legislation) and societal norms, they can use this new understanding to change organizational policies and practices. Understanding and changing the bond between the law and racial power will assist HRD practitioners to create meaningful diversity initiatives (Crenshaw, et al., 1995). CRT does not focus solely on race but instead takes a stand against essentialism which reduces a person’s experience to one characteristic. In this way it allows HRD scholars to examine race, ethnicity, gender and other minority group experiences as intersecting realities that inform an individual’s total work personality.

The primary contribution of this study is that it offers an opportunity for HRD scholars and practitioners to reflect upon and discuss CRT and HRD. The four tenets of CRT are useful for theory development and examining organization development, individual development, and career development from the perspective of power and privilege. Like most educators, HRD professionals seldom analyze or even acknowledge the existence and consequences of power (Schied, Carter, & Howell, 2001).

Power operates on several levels. Power can be used to suppress issues, to prevent them from coming up for decisionmaking; to stop conflict and prevent questioning of prevailing dominant ideas and practices (Schied, Carter, & Howell, 2001). The theory of CRT views this power as enabling racism, silencing voices of nondominant members, and maintaining the status quo. A key feature of CRT, interest convergence (Delgado & Stefanic, 2001), articulates the notion that because racism advances the interest of both White elites (materially) and the working-class (psychologically), large segments of society have little incentive to eradicate it.

Therefore, if HRD practitioners do not eradicate inequities or make the inflexible flexible, the status quo and the incentives remain the same for the dominant group. It is obvious that the impact of diversity is being felt in the field of HRD especially with the escalating importance of globalization. Subsequently, we conclude that it is imperative that HRD practitioners and researchers form more useful collaborations in theory building and in the use multi-paradigms to discuss diversity and equity in human resource development (Lynham, 2000).

References

- Boyatzis, R. (1998). *Transforming qualitative information: thematic analysis and code development*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Bell, D. (1992). *Faces at the bottom of the well: The permanence of racism*. New York: Basic Books
- Cox, T. (1991). The multicultural organization. *Academy of Management Executive*, 5, 34-46.
- Cox, T. (1993). *Cultural diversity in organizations: Theory, research and practice*. San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler.
- Cox, T. (2001). *Creating the multicultural organization*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.

- Crenshaw, N., Gotanda, G., & Peller, & Thomas, K. (1995). Introduction. In K. Crenshaw, N. Gotanda, G. Peller, & K. Thomas *Critical Race Theory: The key writing that formed the movement*. (pp.xiii-xxxii). New York: The New Press.
- Delgado, R., & Stenfanic, J. (2001). *Critical race theory*. New York: New York University Press.
- Delgado, R., & Stenfanic, J. (2000). *Critical race theory: the cutting edge* (2ed.). Philadelphia: Temple University Press.
- DeMeuse, K. & Hostager T. (2001). Developing an instrument for measuring attitudes toward and perceptions of workplace diversity: An initial report. *Human Resource Development Quarterly*, 12(1) San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Hartel, C. E.J., Douthitt, S. S., Hartel, G. & Douthitt, S.Y. (1999). Equally qualified but unequally perceived dissimilarity as a predictor of race and sex discrimination in performance judgments. *Human Resource Development Quarterly*, 10 (2). San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Ladson-Billings, G. (1998). Just what is critical race theory and what is it doing in a “nice” field like education? *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education*, 11, 7-24.
- Ladson-Billings, G. (1999). Just what is critical race theory and what is it doing in a nice field like education? In L. Parker, D. Deyhle & S. Villenas (Ed.), *Race is . . . race isn't: Critical race theories and qualitative studies in education* (pp. 7-30). Boulder, CO: Westview Press.
- Ladson-Billings, G. (2000). Racialized discourses and ethnic epistemologies. In N. K. Denzin & Y. S. Lincoln (Eds.), *The handbook of qualitative research* (2nd Ed) (pp. 257-278). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Lynham, S. (2000). Theory building in the human resource development profession. *Human Resource Development Quarterly* ,11(2). San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Naff, K. C. (2001). *To look like America: Dismantling barriers for women and minorities in government*. Boulder, CO: Westview Press.
- Rocco, T.S. & West, W.G. (1998). Deconstructing privilege: an examination of privilege in adult education. *Adult Education Quarterly*, 4 (4). San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Rothenberg, P.S. (2001). *Race, class, and gender in the United States*. New York: Worth.
- Senge, P. (1990). *The fifth discipline: the art & practice of the learning organization*. New York: Doubleday.
- Schied, F., Carter, V., & Howell, S., (2001). *Silent power: HRD and the management of learning in the workplace*. In R. M. Cervero & A. L. Wilson, *Power in practice* (pp.1-22). San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Snyder, R. A. (1993). The glass ceiling for women: things that don't cause it and things that won't break it. *Human Resource Development Quarterly*, 4(1). San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Thomas, R.R. (1991). *Beyond race and gender*. New York: AMACOM.
- West, C. (1995) Forward. In K. Crenshaw, N. Gotanda, G. Peller, & K. Thomas *Critical Race Theory: The key writings that formed the movement*. (pp. xi-xii) New York: The New Press.
- Wentling, R. M. & Rivas-Palma, N. (2000). Current status of diversity initiatives in selected multinational corporations. *Human Resource Development Quarterly*, 11(1). San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.