

Queering Human Resource Development

Carolyn Meeker

Florida International University, USA

Abstract: Societal norms for gender and sexual identity and practices tend to be heteronormative or homonormative, often privileging individuals belonging to the normative population. Viewing human resource development through a queer lens can suggest ways to support work environments that welcome all identities.

Heteronormativity, or “the institutions, structures of understanding, and practical orientations that make heterosexuality seem not only coherent—that is, organized as a sexuality—but also privileged” (Berlant & Warner, 1998, p. 548) is embedded in laws, regulations, space, and theories. Heterosexual privilege “requires strict boundary maintenance to determine who is normal and who is deviant” and allows the sanctioned discrimination of people who deviate from those boundaries (Rocco & Gallagher, 2006). Some identities outside of heteronormativity are lesbians (L), gay men (G), bisexuals (B), transgender men and women (T) and queers (Q). For the purpose of this paper, the term queer is used in two ways. First, queer refers to an individual who chooses to identify as non-heteronormative but does not choose a label of L, G, B, or T; this might be someone who is attracted to multiple genders or someone who is not sure of their sexual orientation or gender. Queer also refers to a philosophical statement or theory that advocates against binary thinking in terms of sexuality and gender.

Having roots in Rubin’s (1984) concept of the sex/gender system and the practice of compulsory heterosexuality, heteronormativity supports the idea that heterosexuality is normal, natural, and something to protect. The nation-state, or the political and social institutions in the U.S., is heterosexist and works in implicit, discursive, and subtle ways to protect heterosexual and reproductive sexual practices and to marginalize other sexual practices; it oppresses and stigmatizes individuals who perform deviant forms of sexuality and gender (Bell & Binnie, 2000; Berlant & Freeman, 1993; Duggan, 1994; Foucault, 1990). Critiques of heterosexism explore the reproduction of social relations and capitalism.

Homonormativity, on the other hand, is “a politics that does not contest dominant heteronormative assumptions and institutions but upholds and sustains them while promising the possibility of a demobilized gay constituency and a privatized gay culture anchored in domesticity and consumption” (Duggan, 2002, p. 179). Homonormativity includes a hierarchy of worthiness in terms of gender identity and sexual performance where deviants closest to heteronormative standards are deemed most worthy of receiving rights, while deviants furthest away only stand in the way of those rights. Neoliberalism is a recent political platform that works to remap public/private boundaries by shrinking gay public spheres and the role of the state in passing legislation regarding matters deemed “private.” Through neoliberalism, equality becomes a narrow, formal access to a few conservatizing institutions; freedom becomes impunity for bigotry and inequalities in commercial life and civil society; the right to privacy becomes domestic confinement; and democratic politics becomes something to escape (Duggan, 2002).

Queer theory works to denaturalize fixed categories of sexual identity and critique political practices related to identity politics. Three such critiques are that: (a) the existing homosexual/heterosexual polarity is historically recent and culturally specific; (b) the production of a politics from a fixed identity position privileges those who are marked by that position; and

(d) identity politics replaces closets with ghettos, where the “ghetto-closet is another bounded, fixed space of humiliation and another kind of social isolation” (Duggan, 1994, p. 5).

Organizations are neither neutral nor apolitical; “structures and systems have developed over time in specific historical and social situations” (Schied, Carter, & Howell, 2001, p. 52). Organizations and human resource development (HRD) professionals should foster respect for the fundamental rights, dignity, and worth of all employees and encourage workers’ professional and personal development. Recognizing that individuals have diverse identities, needs, and levels of comfort in sharing their experiences with colleagues and supervisors is essential in understanding how HRD professionals can contribute to workers’ development. HRD must recognize where it, and its organizations, privilege some employees to the detriment of others.

Although theory has been largely ignored by HRD (Grace & Hill, 2001) viewing HRD through a queer lens can help organizations, HRD professionals, and workers create more inclusive environments. The purpose of this paper is to review research on various aspects of employment and HRD from a queer lens and to suggest ways that HRD professionals can support work environments beyond heteronormative and homonormative boundaries.

Queer Theory

Foucault (1990) argued that a discourse on sex had been imposed, which categorized sex into legitimate and illegitimate acts and which institutionalized sex beyond simple economic reasoning. This created categories of people based on assumed sexualities; “this new persecution of the peripheral sexualities entailed an incorporation of perversions and a new specification of individuals” (Foucault, 1990, pp. 42-43). Rubin (1984) argued that “Virtually all erotic behavior is considered bad unless a specific reason to exempt it has been established. The most acceptable excuses are marriage, reproduction, and love” (p. 278). A sexual hierarchy exists which draws a metaphorical line between “good” sex and “bad” sex. On the “good” side is normal, natural and blessed sexuality: heterosexual, married, monogamous, procreative, non-commercial, in pairs, in a relationship, same generation, in private, no pornography, bodies only, and vanilla (Rubin, 1984). On the “bad” side is abnormal, unnatural, and damned sexuality: homosexual, unmarried, promiscuous, non-procreative, commercial, alone or in groups, casual, cross-generational, in public, pornography, with manufactured objects, and sadomasochistic (Rubin, 1984).

Sex is not an innate or essential drive or a self-evident universal impulse; rather, sex and sexuality are culturally constructed and shaped by the culture of the day (Rubin, 1984). However, gender performances are involuntary, and often imperfect (Butler, 1993), as individuals might try to perform as they feel is expected. Queer is also performed, as an enactment of a prohibition, a reclamation and resignification of a violent and pejorative term so that it can no longer be used to insult or control (Butler, 1993). Sedgwick (1990) argued that twentieth-century Western culture is structured by a “chronic, now endemic crisis of homo/heterosexual definition, indicatively male” (p. 1) and that most aspects of modern Western culture lack a critical analysis of definitions of homosexual and heterosexual.

Sexuality is public and political (Jakobsen, 2005). Sex is used as a political agent and as a means to repress and dominate society, particularly persons whose sexual orientation or inclinations deviate from societal norms (Rubin, 1984). Legislation, moral expectations, and social norms are enacted to establish how sexuality should be performed, experienced, and monitored. An inside/outside, or dichotomous, binary sets the structure for language, repression, subjectivity, exclusion, oppression, and repudiation of subjects (Fuss, 1991).

The concept of sexual citizenship, linking citizenship to sexuality, involves a compromise between the rights that one receives and the responsibilities acquired as a citizen (Bell & Binnie,

2000). Sex matters a great deal in American public life and sexual regulation has played a crucial role in U.S. politics over the last several decades, including the Defense of Marriage Act, welfare reform, and immigration reform (Jakobsen, 2005). An alliance is forming between fiscal conservatives and social conservatives, based on mutual conservatism about gender, sexuality, and race. Neoliberalism has become a platform benefiting certain privileged lesbians and gays, particularly those who are affluent and overwhelming White, while gays in non-privileged positions might not benefit at all.

Edelman (1998) argued that the idea of the child has been enshrined as “the figure for whom that order must be held in perpetual trust” (p. 21) and that this trope of the child – who happens to be heterosexual – as the inheritor of our future traps us in a (re)production of an imagined past. This cult of the child forebears anyone who does not work toward creating or sustaining a welcoming future for that child. Jakobsen (2005) argued that although capitalism and “the ‘freedom’ of wage labor allows people to make a living outside the structure of the family” (p. 290), “the value of that freedom is defined by regulation, including sexual regulation, that makes the individual open to both exploitation and domination” (pp. 298-299). The rise of capitalism has allowed new forms of kinship but does not always provide psychic support (Eng, 2003). For example, two lesbians in the U.S. might adopt a transnational child who will gain rights, recognition, and some sort of protection. However, that child’s same-sex parents will not have equal access to rights and privileges; they might not even be considered a nuclear family. Queer diaspora allows new methods of family and kinship structures and reorganization of national and transnational communities, not based on origin, filiation, and genetics, but on destination, affiliation, and a common set of social practices or political commitments.

Urban governance and sexual citizenship agendas combine to create sexual spaces which exclude “other” kinds (Bell & Binnie, 2004). Although some boundaries are clearly marked, many can be crossed. For example, Berlant and Warner (1998) crossed a border from private to public when a young heterosexual couple said that Berlant and Warner were the only people they could talk to about using vibrators as sex toys; talking to their straight friends would make the couple “perverts” (p. 654). Ahmed (2004) used a vocabulary of comfort related to space. Spaces of normativity are comfortable for those whose bodies fit in the norms and uncomfortable for those whose bodies do not. Comfort can also be invisible; unrecognized until it is missing.

Human Resource Development

The mission of HRD is to provide individual development focused on performance improvement related to a current job, career development focused on performance improvement related to future assignments, and organizational development focused on optimal utilization of human potential and improved human performance (Gilley & Egglund, 1989). Goals of HRD, which support its mission, include (a) increasing the performance of organizations through development of workers so that they can contribute to the goals of the organization (Knowles, Holton, & Swanson, 1998); (b) encouraging personal development without using organizational performance as the primary motivation (Dirkx, 1996); and (c) fostering learning and learning how to learn (Knowles et al., 1998). Resistance often occurs when HRD professionals seek to address equality in the workplace and encourage respect for all identities. Hill (2009) provided some reasons why: (a) the perceived threat of entitlement by majority groups, or resentment for what is seen as “special rights”; (b) fear by majority groups that LGBTQ people will claim the majority groups’ rights; (c) religious intolerance; (d) negative stereotypes and heteronormativity; and (e) government and politician-sponsored antigay speech.

Rocco, Landorf, and Delgado (2009) laid out a table of “Human Resource Development Missions with Organizational Perspectives” (pp. 16-17). The mission of HRD provides a framework of the table, which illustrates the intersection of the mission and five perspectives toward diversity practice and policy: (a) hostility; (b) compliance; (c) inquiry; (d) inclusion; and (e) advocacy. Within each perspective, the authors suggested things that might occur in relation to individual development, which includes new employee orientation and diversity/sexual harassment training, to career development/ progression, and to organizational development, which includes strategic planning and work/life balance.

A perspective of hostility might include language and actions that exclude sexual minorities, termination upon disclosure or discovery, discriminatory hiring and employee policies, job insecurity and intimidation, policies that prevent infiltration, and work/life balance decisions that cause the employee to stay closeted at social events. A perspective of advocacy might include inclusive language, benefits created for the needs of sexual minorities, discussion of issues relevant to sexual minorities, the ability to choose to disclose, proactive recruitment of and policies written to include sexual minorities, and sexual minorities at all levels of the organization. Organizations with an advocacy perspective may also include inclusive and proactive policy and procedure documents, identifying as an ally, sponsoring and marketing to sexual minorities, not engaging in activities that might undermine goals of equal rights; and encouraging other organizations to be proactive. Work/life balance might allow for open social interactions, support of GLBT employee resource groups, and gender-neutral facilities.

Diversity initiatives often focus on minority groups that are protected by the law. However, not all LGBTQ identities have legal protection and not all topics about diversity are commonly addressed in the workplace, such as racism, patriarchy, class, sexual identity, religion, physical ability, etc. (Cheng, 1997).

Super (1990) outlined a series of processes related to career development: (a) choosing employment (identifying the type of work and organization); (b) establishment (entering and adjusting to the workplace, including orientation and training, setting up one’s work space, and building relationships); (c) advancement (increases in status, salary, scope of responsibility, performance, networking, mentoring, etc.); (d) management (dealing with changes in the workplace or in one’s career); and (e) work/life issues (those affected by career activity but not occurring in the workplace).

LGBTQ identified workers are often attracted to gay-friendly occupations and organizations (Friskopp & Silverstein, 1995) and avoid occupations in which it is relatively difficult to pass as heterosexual or where the penalties for disclosure of a gay identity are high due to institutional policies or coworker attitudes (Badgett & King, 1997). Heterosexism limits the career advancement of LG workers (Friskopp & Silverstein, 1995; Ragins & Cornwell, 2001) and both corporations and gay executives prefer that LGBTQ workers stay in the closet (Miller, 1995). In managing their career, individuals must constantly decide whether to disclose their identity. Additionally, in terms of work/life balance, LGBTQ persons might have little or no family support (Ragins & Wiethoff, 2005), which might contribute to stress on the job.

Workspaces are filled with heterosexual expectations and assumptions and repress nonheterosexual behavior (Boatwright, Gilbert, Forrest, & Ketzenberger, 1996; Allen, 1995). They require constant monitoring, indirect conversation and isolation by LGBTQ workers, who might keep their workspaces free of personal memorabilia that indicate, or disclose, their identities and which might prompt questions by coworkers.

Stigma can create a sense of differentness that is projected and sustained by society and often internalized by individuals within the stigmatized population (Goffman, 1963). The social and political reality of belonging to certain stigmatized groups means that the individual often must disclose some level of personal information to others. Self-disclosure involves verbally sharing information with another person about the nature or cause of personal experiences, dispositions, past events, and future plans (Derlega & Grzelak, 1979). Relationships develop through sharing personal information. To participate in such relationship development, individuals with stigmatized identities might often have to explain or educate—or choose to conceal, mislead, or lie to—people from the dominant cultural group about their experiences.

How more powerful others might receive and act on disclosure can make a difference in how stigmatized individuals approach new learning opportunities or work situations, such as establishing relationships or seeking mentorship (Chelune, 1979). The disclosure may, in fact, result in adverse effects in the workplace related to missed opportunities and promotions or poor treatment. The choice to disclose can be a scary decision, particularly when there is a perceived power difference and when there is a potential negative result of the disclosure. Furthermore, not all LGBTQ persons experience the same situations, desires or challenges; not everyone wants to “come out” or would in the same way or for the same reasons (Manalansan, 1995).

Queering HRD

HRD has “conformed to conventional management philosophy by devising methods of ‘unleashing human expertise’ in ways that benefit the enterprise” and provides “unequal access to learning and development for marginalized workers” (Bierema, 2009, pp. 72-73). Fortunately, queer theory can question assumptions and enhance the conversation regarding critical HRD within the Academy of Human Resource Development, which is a global organization of HRD scholars and practitioners that encourages the systematic study of HRD theories, processes, and practices (Gedro, 2010). HRD professionals need to be prepared for resistance when addressing equality in the workplace. If supported by the organization, HRD could prompt discussions about equal rights and address how granting the same right, such as marriage, to LGBTQ persons will not take away that right from others, or that prohibiting discrimination against LGBTQ persons will not allow discrimination against others. These are not “special” rights or protections for LGBTQ persons. HRD professionals also need to persist in long-term campaigns advocating against negative stereotypes and norms which negatively impact employees.

HRD professionals should seek to create and sustain spaces that are comfortable for all individuals, where sexual morality is not embedded in the work environment, and where fluid, as well as traditional, family structures are valued. This might include providing physical spaces such as gender-neutral bathrooms or office cubicles where individuals share aspects of their lives and inviting family or significant others to work functions can invite individuals to be open. Organizations should recognize that not all employees plan to marry, yet even “single” individuals might have a significant other—partner, friend, parent, sibling—who is crucial to their support network. If employee benefits exist to support the employee, then perhaps the benefits typically granted to a partner or dependent can also be granted to a more generic significant other(s). Discussions about health and wellness might include a perspective that individuals might have solo sex, sex with multiple partners, or sex with no intent to reproduce. Other topics incorporated into HRD initiatives might be self-defense, how to talk to children about stranger danger, how to care for aging parents, dealing with anger or depression, etc.

In the workplace, “men and women may avoid associations with the ‘opposite’ gender traits, actions, or even employment for fear of being branded homosexual” (Carr, 2005, p. 120)

and leaders in corporate America experience implicit pressure to behave according to traditional gender roles (Gedro, 2009, p. 559). Perhaps initiatives can provide mentoring, job shadowing, or information interviews across genders and levels in organizations, with the intent to establish positive working relationships across boundaries. When LGBTQ persons feel discriminated against, they are likely to decrease participation, causing their knowledge and abilities to become wasted resources (Rocco & Gallagher, 2006). The same can be said of homonormative privilege, and the ways that it (negatively) impacts others. Heterosexuals and LGBTQ persons must reflect on heterosexist (and homosexist) privilege and recognize its negative effects in the workplace. Training about topics such as diversity, respect, and civility might help people to understand the impact that actions and decisions can have.

There is a potential in organizations for queer bonds that are not reduced to identity, and which can reach beyond sexual self-recognition (Weiner & Young, 2011). Cohen (1997) argued that queer activism has not created a truly radical or transformative politics; to do so, it might be more effective to focus on integrating or utilizing multiple tactics of the tactics of civil rights movements. Such thinking can lead to broad coalitions, even beyond self-selected employee groups, where groups work together to seek equality and fair conditions for everyone.

Chapman and Gedro (2009) recommended that individuals who teach courses on HRD provide a safe space for teacher and student disclosure, as coming out can help students learn how discrimination functions and how to correct assumptions that everyone is heterosexual. However, as not everyone wants to or feels a need to disclose their experiences and identities (i.e. “come out”); the choice to not disclose should also be included in such curricula. By discussing difficult issues such as sexual orientation and discrimination, and by valuing inclusion and equity, the field of HRD can mature (Gedro, 2007).

Some popular and scholarly literature pay lip service to cultural diversity while deploying “monolithic constructions of gayness and gay liberation” (Manalansa, 1995, p. 429). Warner (1993) suggested that queer critiques need to dig deeper into what is happening in society and politics. Instead of asking what gives a queer person the right to be queer/non heterosexual, instead, ask what gives a person the right to be heterosexual. When did they come out as heterosexual? Loo and Rocco (2009) argued that “A dynamic perspective on the effects of being a sexual minority should focus on both contemporaneous effects in work settings and dynamic impacts in terms of career profiles and human capital development in a life course perspectives” (p. 90). Jakobsen (2005) encouraged a more broad coalitional politics, joined with shared interests, to expand social spaces for lives lived outside of the bounds of the heterosexual and nuclear family. Duggan (2002) challenged queer scholars to actively develop strategies for “queering the state” and bridging the language gap that exists between scholarly work and public discourse. HRD researchers and practitioners can address these concerns by conducting research on and implementing strategies related to diversity and intersectionality.

Suggestions for Future Research

Scholars and practitioners of Human Resource Development should engage in critical discourses and activities of HRD. We should look beyond normative definitions of identity in our research and practices. One example of this would be to examine the experiences of workers who identify as neither heteronormative nor homonormative. Another example would be to include reflective questions such as “when did you come out as heterosexual?” or “how many times have you defended your sexual orientation to a family member?” to a diversity workshop. Research regarding career development or succession planning should take into consideration that workers who identify outside of normative expectations might have different experiences

than workers who identify within. Data from studies of such workers might indicate ways of supporting work environments that are more inclusive of non-normative workers. Research on how employee benefits such as medical insurance and tuition waiver affect workers' performance and organizational success can look beyond traditional options for acceptable beneficiaries. For example, if employee benefits are meant to support employees and impact performance in positive ways, then perhaps an employee might be better served if allowed to choose a beneficiary who is not a partner, child, or other dependent. Opening up the possibilities beyond the nuclear family might have a positive impact on employees and their performance. In going beyond normative discourses and research, HRD can be "queered" and experiences of non-normative workers might be better understood.

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