The need for intersectional practices in addressing workplace diversity

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In “Designing More Effective Practices for Reducing Workplace Inequality,” Quinetta Roberson, Eden King, and Mikki Hebl suggest robust strategies for addressing inequality. They also list unanswered questions, such as whether any practices improve employment opportunities across all demographic groups or contexts. I see one potential answer: that organizational leaders and researchers look to intersectionality as a framework for addressing inequalities that occur inside and outside of organizations.

An intersectionality framework considers the effects of belonging to multiple social groups simultaneously—for instance, the ways that being both Black and a woman can undercut opportunities beyond the independent ways that being Black or being a woman can. The failure to recognize how diversity policies affect people who belong to multiple disadvantaged groups will perpetuate inequalities rather than eliminate them.

Kimberlé Crenshaw coined the term *intersectionality* after analyzing several lawsuits involving a combination of race and sex discrimination claims, including a 1976 case in which a workplace policy resulted in disproportionate layoffs of Black women. In *DeGraffenreid v. General Motors*, five Black women sued General Motors, arguing that its layoff policy, which eliminated jobs on the basis of seniority, targeted Black women exclusively. GM hired Black women in large numbers only after 1964, possibly because of the passage that year of the Civil Rights Act, with its Title VII employment regulations. Thus, Black women had the least seniority at GM and were disproportionately affected by seniority-based layoffs during an early 1970s recession. As is common for cases based on race and sex discrimination, the court ruled against the plaintiffs because the layoff decision did not systematically terminate either women or Black people overall. The judge refused to examine the action for discrimination based on a combination of race and sex because Title VII, in his view, did not create a classification of Black women as a protected class separate from White women and Black men.

Such decisions overlook the unique forms of discrimination and invisibility that women of color have faced in the past and continue to confront in workplaces today. Crenshaw’s formulation of intersectionality created a prism through which decisionmakers within the legal system and organizations can understand the conceptual limitations of looking only at single-identity groups. The concept of intersectionality can help people see how members of multiple oppressed groups, such as Black women, too often find themselves in more precarious economic and social positions than other people in their broader identity groups.

As microcosms of society, organizations are ideal places to experiment with intersectionality-informed policies meant to address inequalities. For example, a law firm described in a 2001 article by Robin J. Ely and David A. Thomas implemented targeted human resource practices, such as hiring Latina attorneys, to diversify its all-White female staff as part of an effort to better fulfill its mission of advancing the well-being of low-income women of all backgrounds, including those who identified as women of color. These actions, in turn, helped to reshape the organization’s priorities and interests. Whereas the firm had originally focused on cases of sexual discrimination, it expanded its repertoire to address other issues of oppression affecting many low-income women, such as the need for a living wage and support with immigration issues. Employees reported that they valued exploring different points of view, learning about one another’s life experiences, and building on that knowledge to better meet the needs of the people they were serving.

A closer look at workplace diversity practices through an intersectionality lens can enhance an organization’s ability to mitigate inequality. Workplace managers and leaders can take several actions to ensure that their organization’s diversity policies are intersectional.

First, organizational leadership can evaluate how their workplace diversity policies may affect individuals who belong to multiple disadvantaged groups. I applaud Roberson and her coauthors’ review for identifying the different ways that policies can affect specific social identity groups. Frank Dobbin and Alexandra Kalev have also detailed such variances in the effects of diversity policies on specific groups. The advice applies to lawmakers, as well. If they fail to evaluate intersectionality, laws intended to reduce the gender wage gap, for instance, could underestimate the adjustments needed to bring parity to Black, Latina, and indigenous women, because the laws would not take into account the added income-dampening effects of being both a woman and a racial minority. Lumping together all women or all minorities can mask important differences in employee experiences, whereas disaggregating data to examine subgroups of employees (for example, women of color) along multiple dimensions of difference simultaneously can provide the metrics needed to monitor and address multiple forms of inequality.

Second, organizational leaders should broaden the focus of diversity efforts to account for individuals’ holistic identities. Companies have
difficulty addressing multiple forms of inequality at the same time, which can lead to fragmented diversity policies that do not change the status quo. Initiatives that narrowly focus on either gender or race may increase minority representation but fail to address societal hierarchies built into organizations that are led mostly by White males. Actions to address these societal hierarchies include reducing the biases that stand in the way of diverse leadership (such as the conscious or unconscious belief that only White men can be leaders), diversifying networks to deepen connections between dominant and marginalized groups, and ensuring that members of multiple marginalized groups have inclusive and equitable access to powerful positions. Employees may learn how to address these multiple hierarchies through training sessions.

Third, organizational leaders who are aware of the multiplicity of issues that workers from marginalized social identity groups face may use that knowledge to shape inequality-reducing actions that go beyond diversity training. Some of these issues are seemingly external to organizations, but recent social movements (notably #MeToo and Black Lives Matter) clearly demonstrate the integral role that organizations play in creating inequalities and can also play in disrupting them. As an example, after the unjust arrest in 2018 of two Black men in a Philadelphia Starbucks, the coffee chain spearheaded a companywide initiative to address biases and turn its shops into inclusive spaces for all customers. To do so, they equipped their employees with tools to disrupt discriminatory behavior, which can enhance the experiences not only of customers but also of employees from multiple marginalized groups.

As the writer and civil rights activist Audre Lorde said, “there is no such thing as a single-issue struggle because we do not live single-issue lives.” Organizational leaders must adopt a similar view if they desire to create inclusive, diverse, and equitable workplaces. Organizations that are serious about reducing inequality ignore intersectionality at their peril.

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