Equity and Access in the Workplace: A Feminist HRD Perspective

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The issues of equity and access are becoming increasingly important as the workforce becomes diversified. As the number of minority groups in the ranks of organizations grows, there is a need to examine the issues related to equity and access from a perspective that strives for equality, e.g. feminist theory. This paper examines feminism's perspectives on workplace equity and access, and the implications for the field of HRD.

Keywords: Feminist Theory, Equity, Access

The work world is becoming increasingly interconnected through globalization and technology. In order to remain competitive, organizations must fully utilize the knowledge and talent of their increasingly diverse employees (Wentling, 1998). As these diverse employees come into contact with traditional work systems, different cultures and viewpoints begin to conflict. Some of these conflicts are centered on who has access to certain levels of the workforce, and whether this access and the opportunities provided in the workplace are equal for all working persons. Procedures that were set in place to guide a homogeneous workforce are no longer sustainable and a new system, one that is fair to all members of the workforce, is arising.

The purpose of this paper is to fulfill the need for a comprehensive review of the literature surrounding the issues of equity and access in the workplace from a feminist perspective. This perspective offers a unique viewpoint on the equity and access issue by focusing on the types of questions that are not normally asked, namely, those of identity and power. The literature areas discussed in this paper (identity, career influences, and barriers) represent the main bodies of work in this area. The implications for future Human Resource Development (HRD) research and practice are also detailed.

Theoretical Framework

One of the ways in which the diversification of the workforce is occurring is through women and minorities entering the workforce in increasing numbers (Inman, 1998). One of the main groups that is examining this topic are the feminist theorists. There are three main categories of feminist pedagogy: psychological, structural, and post-structural frameworks (Tisdell, 1998). This paper uses feminist voices from all three frameworks, and covers the themes of relationships, power structures, systems of oppression, shifting identities, positionality of participants, and the barriers that impact the everyday working lives of employees (Johnson, 2004).

There are also several different definitions of feminist theory. This paper uses the definition provided by Bierema and Cseh (2003). According to these scholars, using a feminist lens means looking at the world from a perspective that includes the place and history of women in society and seeks equality between the genders. Feminist research also strives for equality that is inclusive regardless of race or sexual orientation. Often, this means examining workplace issues through looking at forms of oppression, social and power relationships, and social justice (Brisolara, 2003). In addition to identifying the theory of feminism that is being used in this paper, the terms 'equity' and 'access' must also be defined. Equity means equal treatment across all employees, while access is considered to be the ability to find and engage in positive work opportunities (Hite, 2004).

One question that may be asked is why should we use feminist theory instead of some other theoretical framework? What does feminism have to offer to this issue for HRD professionals? As an answer, feminism is embedded in a rich, diverse, and well-developed body of literature in which the emerging elements of the theory are vigorously discussed and practiced (Brisolara, 2003). Feminist theory is grounded in many other theories such as biology, physiology, sociology, economics, philosophy, and the humanities, just to name a few, all of which have provided contributions to the overall theory and practice of feminism. Feminist theory seeks to find and acknowledge multiple truths and realities (Johnson, 2002). Finally, feminist theory offers a unique viewpoint on the issue of equity and access in the workforce because it raises the types of questions that need to be addressed (Brisolara, 2003). These questions seek to uncover power relationships, unspoken rules, and the subterranean forces that guide work relationships. These questions in particular apply to the HRD profession because HRD is an evolving discipline that seeks to maximize the human workforce potential, and is linked to the creation of value in work (Bierema & Cseh, 2003). In order for HRD to be successful in its endeavors, it needs to examine issues related to gender, ethnicity, and sexual orientation. It also needs to be sensitive to the issues of power relationships and social and political change.

Method

This paper began with the author's identification of the need for a comprehensive review of the literature surrounding the ideas of equity and access in the workplace. The peer-reviewed articles collected for this paper were gathered through the Infotrac, ABI-Inform, and EBSCO databases. The search terms 'equity' and 'access' were used along with 'feminism', 'feminist', 'feminist theory', and 'HRD' to identify articles that were appropriate for the topic of this paper. The author of this paper proceeded to examine the text of each article to determine if the article in question indeed represented a sound study or review paper on the chosen topic.

Identity and Work

A person's identity depends on how they define themselves and whether they have positive or negative views of their own self-worth (Bierema, 2001). Part of identity is constituted by the roles that a person has. Gender is one of the main role identities of people that affects equity and access in the workforce. Women and minorities in particular tend to have multiple roles, many of which are informal and depend on the relationships that they are involved in. In a work situation, these informal relationships are usually not strongly valued. This devaluation of certain identity elements is part of the reason that these groups may not identify as well with their work. While these work relationships are very important, they can reinforce traditional power relations as women and minorities struggle to adapt to a workplace that does not accept or fit their complex identities.

Another main component of a person's identity that affects their work is their race and/or ethnicity. In the late 1970s, there were no ethnic minority women in corporate management, and more than thirty years later, the numbers are still shockingly small, much less than the number of women managers (Bernier & Rocco, 2003). Traditionally, workers of color have had a much harder time fighting discrimination in hiring and promotion (Higginbotham, 2004). The background factors that affect this group's identity in the workforce are much more important than for other groups, because racial and ethnic minorities are often socialized to speak about race as a factor that influences their lives, while the traditional policy in many organizations is to be "color blind" and not see race, and therefore not see the racial barriers and discriminations that occur.

A person's sexual orientation is a major component of their identity, one that many workers do not choose to voluntarily disclose if they belong to a minority group (Badgett, 1995). If the workplace discriminates against people with these orientations, then lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender employees may find themselves in a diminished and potentially hostile career environment. In these circumstances, promotion and advancement becomes nearly impossible, despite the fact that this discrimination is illegal. This in turn may lead to long-term psychological, political, and economic consequences. Thusly, lesbian and gay employees may be pressured by their communities to not disclose their sexual orientation, or to act as a traditional heterosexual worker. In order to prevent sexual orientation discrimination, polices must be enacted from the top down, and modeling at all levels of the organization must occur to show that sexual orientation is not a factor in management decisions.

Where the borders between different identities become crossed or blurred is where the real issue with equity and access takes place. For example, black women often receive "double marginalization" because of their dual status as both women and racial minorities (Hite, 2004). A term that is often used for this is racialized sexism. The point is that when an individual has an identity that belongs to a non-dominant group, they will experience barriers to equity and access in the workforce, and when they belong to multiple non-dominant groups, these barriers increase exponentially.

Career Influences

The career development of women and other diverse minority groups is very complex (Bierema, 1998). First, the career development of these groups is uneven because these individuals must deal with a combination of stereotypes, attitudes, roles expectations, behaviors, and discriminations when choosing a career path. Next, women and minorities' career success is more dependent on education, prior experience, and performance ratings that those of white men. While these minority groups have made advances, it is a general consensus that they haven't ascended high enough or fast enough in organization ranks. One reason for the delay in advancement may be that as technology, internationalization, and organization structures have all changed, the systems that deal with equity and access issues have remained the same and generally retain a one-size-fits-all mentality. This mentality negatively affects the career development of women and minority groups because they are positioned differently in organizations due to their identity characteristics. Another influence is that much of the research that has been done on career development issues has focused on middle-class white men, and therefore some widely cited and enacted career development theories have been constructed entirely without the input of women and other minorities (Johnson-Bailey & Tisdell, 1998). Based on the review of the literature, there are three main influences on the careers of women, racial and ethnic minorities, and individuals of non-traditional sexual orientation. These are family and relationships, mentoring, and networks (Schreiber, 1998).

Family and Relationships

As the number of minority groups entering the workforce continues to increase exponentially, it becomes important to examine how the issues of family and relationships interact with work, and more specifically, with the twin issues of equity and access. The first way in which this occurs is that family and child care responsibilities can harm employees' abilities to find and actively participate in mentoring relationship and other career building opportunities (Hansman, 1998). Women's careers can suffer if they take time off of work due to family (Hansman, 1998). Wentling states that family and relationship interactions with work are not gender issues, but rather are related to how traditional roles and responsibilities impact any employee's career (1998).

The working world does not easily combine with the worlds of family and other outside relationships (Schreiber, 1998). For minority groups, the two worlds interact and interfere with each other more than for white men. This is because men tend to view the two roles as occurring at different times and locations, while they occur simultaneously for women and minorities. Currently, over two-thirds of women with children under age six work outside of the house (US Bureau of Labor Statistics), yet these women are usually expected to make a choice between work and family. A break in employment to marry or have children can automatically be viewed as negative, and have long-lasting negative consequences on both a career and personal well-being (Schreiber, 1998). Traditional career development theories focus on a consistent and uninterrupted development. However, more holistic research has shown that these theories are not true for many women and minorities.

One of the main components of how family and relationships impact an employee's career is stress (Wentling, 1998). As employees struggle to balance their work life and their outside-of-work life, this stress can lead to a decrease in job performance and in increase in absenteeism and serious health concerns. The American Medical Association estimates that more than 80 percent of health problems in employees are in some way related to stress (Friedman, 1991). These health concerns cost organizations billions of dollars, and many HRD professionals consider these concerns to be a major issue that HRD needs to address.

One possible solution to the work-family balance is alternative work arrangements, including part-time or temporary work (Schreiber, 1998). Although these techniques are used most often by women with children, they have the potential to assist any employee who requires help with their work-life balance (Kropf, 1998). In addition to alternative work arrangements, women and minority groups also need to foster their out-of-work relationships. These relationships provide social companionship that bolsters self-esteem and relieves stress. In fact, these relationships are often powerful enough to provide happiness across all areas of an employee's life, and enable them to better balance work and family life.

Another solution to solve the in-work and out-of-work conflict is to increase benefit plans (Wentling, 1998). These flexible plans allows employees to choose a compensation package which best fits their unique needs. Wentling found that many employees will gladly take a decrease in pay in exchange for a flexible benefit plan. Certain additional services, such as education, counseling, and child and elder care services, all serve to reduce employee stress, increase productivity, and overall make employees value their workplace more.

Mentoring

Mentoring is often broadly defined as connecting a senior staff person to a junior staff person with the goal of career guidance and personal support (McDonald & Hite, 1998). Mentoring fosters learning and eases career transitions (Bierema, 2001). However, mentoring has also been shown as a principle reinforcer of the power relationships within organizations. In learning situations at work, some people seek out mentors regardless of age, gender, etc., while others have a hard time balancing the need for help with their independence. Informal mentoring works best in most cases, but in patriarchal organizations, this type of mentoring may be hard to find.

Having a mentor may increase a worker's self-esteem, affecting their work identity, yet research has generally shown that women and other minorities traditionally have less access to mentoring relationships (Hansman, 1998). This usually happens because of a variety of issues. First, since there tends to be a lack of senior women and minority managers in organizations, this severely decreases the chance that a rising employee will be able to find an available mentor from their identity group. Second, there are problems that exist when women are mentored by men. Kram has identified several major complications with this type of mentoring (1985). The first is that men and women tend to assume stereotypical roles when interacting with each other. Another is that men and women tend to have differing concerns about work, and therefore a cross-gender mentor relationship does not allow for these concerns to be addressed. Finally, the concern of sexual harassment may lay over any mentoring relationship that occurs between men and women. These complications can also apply when traditional-minded white men mentor racial and sexual orientation minorities.

Women of color find their mentoring issues compounded by their dual identities of gender and race (Hansman, 1998). It is especially important for employees with multiple minority status to receive mentoring, yet these are the workers who are most likely to not get the support that they need. These individuals often feel excluded from their fellow employees, and may be hesitant to initiate a mentoring relationship (Johnson-Bailey & Tisdell, 1998). When questioned, many women of color insisted that the secret to intentional career development is to seek out mentors. However, this may not be a good solution to this problem, as finding an appropriate mentor can be time-consuming, and in certain organizations, nearly impossible.

Networks

Finding women among the top echelons of organizations is rare, as just slightly more than one percent of CEOs are women (Bierema, 2005). This lack of role models is one of the factors that prevent women from rising in the ranks. A key way in which women and minorities can overcome this barrier and advance through corporate ranks is through building relationships, especially social networks. Networking is the process of working together with people for the purpose of friendship and support (Travers et al., 1997). Networks create bonds between their members that glue them together and supply order, while at the same time providing opportunities for change (Powell & Smith-Doerr, 1994). Networks also act as a community of support that help disadvantaged employees guide each other into opportune career paths and help them to work in unfriendly corporate environments (Bierema, 2005). There are three main characteristics of networks: homophily, the tendency for people to interact with similar people; tie strength, and range (Brass, 1992). Historically, the strongest networks are less homophilious, have weak ties, and have a wide range. There are three recognized types of networks: professional networks, training networks, and in-company networks. These networks can be either informal or they can be formally structured and sponsored by the organization (Bierema, 2005).

All networks are useful mediums for sharing information and minimizing isolation among their members (Bierema, 2005). However, networks can also indirectly reproduce patriarchy simply by being associated with a minority group. These groups can have stigmas attached to them that erode the very reason that the network exists in the first place. If the network members worry that their involvement in the network will have dire consequences and could potentially damage their career, the network is not likely to succeed in its goals. In addition, for the network to be successful, it needs to work at changing the power relations within the organization. Without support, the network will instead reproduce these power relationships within the network and duplicate patriarchal power structures instead of forging new ones.

Another factor that influences how networks affect careers is through a concept known as "gender consciousness", which is the degree to which people and organizations recognize how gender affects privileges and opportunities (Bierema, 2005). One role of networks is to provide a location where gender consciousness can be explored. However, some women may be gender unconsciousness and believe that gender has no effect upon their behavior and treatment, while other women in the same organization recognize and note key gender differences. Since most organizations cannot be both gender conscious and gender unconsciousness, the duality of this situation is most likely due to some women's fear of recognizing that they are discriminated against. The concept of gender consciousness can also be applied to the other minority groups mentioned in this paper.

Finally, individuals' willingness to take action affects how networks influence employee's careers (Bierema, 2005). Network members who acknowledge gender inequalities but do not take action themselves usually claim that they are too tired, do not have the time or the background, or do not have the self-confidence to become a leader in enacting change. The main action of these individuals is involving other women and minorities in the network and engaging them in discussions about how to improve the workplace culture. However, without strong key members enacting change, the network is ultimately doomed to fail.

Barriers to Equity and Access

Women were given the right to vote in 1920, and by 1940 more than 25 percent of all women were in the workforce. This number increased dramatically during World War II, and currently more than 60 percent of all workers are women. Even though over half of the workforce is comprised of women, and despite exceptional gains in pay, promotion, and benefits, there is still a tremendous lack of workforce equality. The government has passed numerous laws in an effort to even the playing field, including the 1991 Glass Ceiling Act, but in spite of this, less than 5 percent of women are in senior level management positions, only 1 percent up from 1900.

The term "glass ceiling" was only coined about 20 years ago (Inman, 1998). It is described as a transparent barrier that prevents women from advancing above a certain level in an organization, usually the general manager level (Powell & Butterfield, 1994). It is a barrier to women not because of their lack of ability as a group, but rather just for the fact that they are women. Surprisingly, very little empirical data has been collected on the phenomenon of the glass ceiling, especially in the field of HRD. One empirical study that was performed by Powell and Butterfield (1994) suggests that gender directly influences promotion decisions. The results of this study also suggest that when an open and systematic promotion decision making process is used, the glass ceiling can be averted. Some now consider the glass ceiling to be breakable, but only under extreme circumstances, and usually only for white women (Johnson-Bailey & Tisdell, 1998). Black women and other racial minorities often experience something called the Lucite ceiling, a ceiling that you can see through but that is so strong, you cannot break it. This ceiling, regardless of the term used for it, is often considered one of the major barriers to equity and access in organizations.

Another major barrier to equity and access is an overwhelmingly traditional male-dominated culture. Every participant in a case study about women's networks agreed that the key barrier to women's equality in the workforce is a patriarchal and resistant culture (Bierema, 2005). In an overwhelmingly male dominated and

orientated workplace culture, there is little awareness of diversity, and even less interest in making the organization's services and opportunities equally available and accessible to everyone.

A third major barrier to equity and access in the workplace is the issue of power and politics within the organization. Power can be defined as the ability of one group or person to control another group or person (Hathaway, 1992). Power and conflict are central features in an organization, the most significant forms of which are authority, expertise, control of rewards, coercive power, and personal power. In the environment of an organization, power is used to control equality and access to resources. Coercion in an organization leads to powerlessness, which is often made worse by powerless groups having a lack of information and support. Office power and politics are ubiquitous, and as such, groups need to recognize this fact and enact ways to reduce their powerlessness. Although most Western companies and many international ones declare themselves to be "equal opportunity employers", the fact remains that women and other minorities are still underrepresented in positions of power, are paid less, and suffer more from office politics (Lien, 2005).

Powerlessness and frustration in organizations come from three main political influences: structural barriers, behavior barriers, and accommodation and rationalization (Lien, 2005). Structural barriers result from society treating minority groups differently, the perpetuation of official and unofficial job restrictions, and unclear company policies about promotion. Behavioral barriers result from supervisors not giving minority workers autonomy and freedom to learn, exploiting those with less experience, not utilizing the worker to the full extent of their talents, and giving credit for work done by minority workers to other workers. Unfortunately, the worst power and politics barrier to the advancement of minority workers is often themselves. Many workers need job experience, and so they assimilate into the environment: it becomes easier to accept and rationalize staying and working in a patriarchal-dominated environment then taking a risk and trying to find other more equal work that, especially in international contexts, may simply not exist.

Another way in which traditional male-dominated power is perpetuated in organizations is through trade unions (Lundy, 1998). Unions grew throughout the 1960s and 70s and provided much needed minority involvement and leadership in areas of work concerns, such as equal pay and parental leave time. However, the glass ceiling also existed in the union organizations, and women and minorities were not achieving leadership positions despite their overwhelming majority in membership. In the late 1990s, the number of top union officers who were women or minorities hovered at just 10 percent (US Bureau of Labor Statistics). The reason for this low number is that the personnel selection politics that are prevalent in organizations are also prevalent in the unions, which prevents women and minorities from gaining leadership positions (Lundy, 1998). A way to counteract this trend is through education and training programs based within the union. Through these, women and minority union members can develop leadership skills, which help them rise in the union ranks. However, union participation takes time, and many minority union members say that outside pressures, such as family and relationships, outweigh any perceived benefits of holding a high position within the union. Because of this, any interventions that strive to include women or minorities in the upper echelons of unions need to include plans that holistically incorporate all aspects of employees' lives.

Role of Human Resource Development

Why should HR researchers and practitioners care about this issue? The answer is that the function of HRD in organizations is to maximize the potential of all employees for the betterment of the entire organization (McDonald & Hite, 1998). As the workforce becomes increasingly global due to technology, organizations become more diverse places to work. However, the hiring, promotion, and support of diverse individuals has not kept up with the speed at which organizations are diversifying. As the developmental unit of an organization, HRD is perfectly positioned to bring awareness to and advocate for the equity and access of minority groups. It needs to expand its traditional roles by adopting a feminist perspective and enacting change because the issues of equity and access are both an individual career and a larger organizational development issue. HRD has an especially important role in trade unions, since HRD is apt at seeing both the bottom line and the holistic humanistic aspects of their work influences (Lundy, 1998). Trade unions could benefit from this holistic perspective, since it would allow them to engage in non-traditional organization practices and promote union members of diverse backgrounds. HRD's main role in the union relationship would be to teach equity and access to the trade union members, and to promote fair promotion and education opportunities.

One key role of HRD is a recognition of the need to be critical of where its theories and literature have developed from, and how this influences the current and future roles of HRD (Fenwick, 2005). HRD researchers and practitioners must remain attentive to the issues of voice and equity because it is within their power to manipulate how these issues affect the workforce. Historically, HRD has looked askew at social justice issues and the experience of women and other diverse minority groups. Feminist theory calls for a new role of the field which focuses on declaring new strategies that address the issues of equity and access in organizations.

Implications for HRD Research and Practice

The first thing that HRD researchers need to accept is that much of the traditional literature upon which work theories are built is based on research conducted almost entirely upon middle-aged white men (Johnson-Bailey & Tisdell, 1998). Feminist theory tells us to reexamine our basic theories about adult education to ensure that they take into account multiple perspectives, and that they strive for equity in their data gathering methods. While women and other minority groups should have equal access in organizations, it is just as important for them to have equal access to research studies, especially when these studies will be used to build theories that influence how minorities are treated within organizations. Because of this, the field of HRD requires more research and literature that takes a holistic, feminist approach to these diversity issues and the topics of equity and access. The field will also be in the critical role of developing holistic and flexible theories and tools that can be utilized in the changing environments of organizations.

Another important issue that HRD researchers should be focusing on is the phenomenon of the glass ceiling (Bierema, 2001). Although it is considered to be a critical component of HRD research, very little empirical work has been done on this concept (Powell & Butterfield, 1994). HRD educators need to take it upon themselves to examine this issue in full. One roadblock that the field might encounter is skepticism about gender inequalities, because examination of gender roles is usually frowned upon (Bierema, 2001). However, with the changing environment of work, there is a need for this kind of research. Research on the glass ceiling would begin by first examining how overall promotional decisions are made, and then narrowing the focus to advancement by gender, racial, and sexual orientation minorities. HRD practitioners can also affect the glass ceiling phenomenon by advocating for and helping to implement open and systematic promotion processes so that advancement is based on skill and experience, not demographics. Developing the organization so that decision makers assume accountability for their actions is another role that practitioners must make.

One thing that entire HRD departments can do is specifically include information, and even entire classes, regarding how different identities affect a person's work life (Johnson-Bailey & Tisdell, 1998). A recent study by Bierema and Storberg-Walker found that a widely used HRD classroom text contained no references to gender, race, or sexuality (2007). It is important for HRD classes to emphasize that demographic information such as gender, ethnicity, and sexual orientation are in fact key identity components, Another important issue for HRD departments to address in their courses is the issue of power and politics. These topics are often glossed over or not discussed at all in many HRD curriculums, while feminist theory tells us that these issues should be at the forefront of how we examine HRD theory and practice.

The field of HRD may soon find itself on the front line of fighting for equity and access in organizations, because it will be up to the scholars and practitioners to expand the research in the field and ensure that change is enacted. These educators must take care to foster women and minorities' self-exploration and assessment of their work context (Bierema, 2001). They must also take care to critically examine the current career development literature and teach those topics which are holistic in nature. Finally, they must work to combine and update holistic theories to create new and innovative career development models. Finally, research must continue to be done on women, minorities, and all disadvantaged groups, and these worker's experiences must be built into all of the components of HRD theory and practice.

As organizations change, the concept of the straight and true career path is fading away (McDonald & Hite, 1998). The career planning aspect of HRD practitioners' work has changed to a more entrepreneurial, nonlinear approach in which the practitioner must employ flexible and broad-based criteria for career success. This broad sweeping approach may not be the answer for minority groups because, due their traditional lack of inclusion in career advancement activities, these groups may need special career planning guidance to update their skills and to help them reassess their career goals. Organizations must be developed to take on a more inclusive mentality about career planning, with emphasis on the fact that identical planning will not work for all employees.

When working with minority groups in career development, HRD practitioners must consider alternative work arrangements, such as flexible scheduling, telecommuting, working from home using technology, or entrepreneurial activities (Schreiber, 1998). These arrangements allow workers to seek balance among their work, their families, and their outside relationships. While traditionally these alternatives have been viewed skeptically, appreciation for them has grown as the working world becomes increasingly diverse. In order to help employees succeed in part-time arrangements, HRD practitioners must ensure that these employees' supervisors are also well-versed in success strategies (Kropf, 1998). These employees need a strong support network, including good supervisors who can direct them to the proper career opportunities. These supervisors should also help the employees focus on work and productivity. Most importantly, however, the employees should focus on using effective communication about the standards that are expected of them, and ensure that they continue to demonstrate hard work and commitment to their career while remaining flexible and adaptable in their work schedules.

Another way in which HRD practitioners can help to implement equity and access is through formal mentoring programs that include group mentoring where members of the group belong to minority identities (McDonald & Hite, 1998). These mentoring programs can be the first step along the path to changing the overall

culture of the organization by working to eliminate the barriers to equity and access (Bierema, 1998). This will in turn alter the structure of the organization to become more supportive of women and minority groups. The politics in the organization will also gradually change as the culture evolves, and will begin to reflect family-friendly practices and an equal and fair reward system.

Minority groups can also receive equal access and advancement through training opportunities which are implemented by HRD practitioners. This formal training may in turn lead to promotions (McDonald & Hite, 1998). Larwood and Wood (1995) found that women usually want additional training about such topics as the organization's culture, how to network, and how to work around the power and political relationships that exist. Some proponents of the training solution insist that single-gender training programs are the best way to go about equalizing the genders and minorities in the workforce. However, opponents suggest that adult education environments tend to perpetuate power relationships, and formal training would reinforce the dominate culture of the organization. Due to these conflicting opinions, practitioners must be careful before enacting training as an overarching solution, especially since the training needs of various employees will be different depending on the organization and the individual employees in question.

Informal learning can be considered the most important activity that HRD practitioners must engage in in order for minority groups to receive equity in the workplace and access to all available support and opportunities (McDonald & Hite, 1998). Women and other minorities often report that their success in reaching the upper echelons of an organization comes from taking a chance and performing outstandingly in a risky task. These tasks need to be highly visible, and usually involve multiple job functions. However, in organizations, these opportunities are few and far between, and there is always the chance that an employee will fail at this task, thus setting back his or her career. One way to counteract this phenomenon is through informal learning. HRD can provide this learning through developing job rotations. These enable employees to gain multiple skills while on the job. Informal learning, along with mentoring and workplace networks, can give minority groups the skills they need to take high-risk opportunities when they arise, but the ultimate goal of these interventions would be to ensure equity so that employees do not have to take these risks as the only way to further their careers.

One way in which the HRD field in general can address the issues of equity and access for women and minority workers is to take a pragmatic approach to research and practice (Fenwick, 2005). This approach would allow HRD to remain flexible and responsive to changes and different circumstances. In a world of ever-increasing change and interconnectedness, the new pragmatic HRD would remain strong yet flexible in its various roles. One barrier to this role is that HRD does not often have the power to drive change. Rather, the field often finds itself taking a supportive role, in which its voice may or may not be heard. To help researchers and practitioners counter this, the field needs to focus on achieving small wins that challenge traditional inequalities, and bring forth change without risking individual jobs and well-being. These projects, often referred to micro-emancipatory actions, work by allowing HRD to take on an activist role without attempting radical transformations that could potentially backfire and do more harm than good. The forerunners of social action in the field of HRD, such as the feminists, are finding that these micro-emancipatory actions are extremely beneficial for both the workers in an organization, and for HRD itself.

One final factor that HRD researchers and practitioners must take into consideration is the fact that we must critically examine ourselves for any hidden biases regarding gender, race, and sexual orientation, and how these factors might impact our research and practice on the issues of equity and access. If an HRD individual tries to enact equity or give everyone equal access while they themselves harbor stereotypes, then these HRD interventions are likely to fail. It is only once we have enacted equity and access within ourselves that we can enact them within organizations.

Conclusion

Women and other minorities are striving to succeed in their chosen professionals. Often, however, they find themselves held back by dominant patriarchal cultures and barriers that are based on stereotypes and unfair traditions. If organizations are truly striving for equity and access within their ranks, then change must be enacted so that all employees have equal chances to advance and to be rewarded for their work. The field of HRD can help in this progression towards equality by first focusing on change within itself as a field, and then expanding this change in organizations through an innovative use of training, mentoring, informal learning, and organizational development. Feminist theory can act as a guide upon this journey by providing the steps through which HRD can pragmatically update its theories and practices to a more holistic grounding, and by serving as the voice through which social change can be enacted.

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