Feminist Theory and Queer Theory: Implications for HRD Research and Practice

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Abstract

The Problem.
Although the workforce has become increasingly diverse, there has not been a corresponding interrogation of the assumptions about the ways that demographics, particularly gender, sexual orientation, gender identity, and gender expression, relate to Human Resource Development (HRD) imperatives.

The Solution.
This article will provide justification for why feminist theory and queer theory should be drawn into conversation with each other as useful frameworks for HRD research and scholarship. These frameworks are concerned with "othering" practices and the marginalization that can occur in workplaces, and they can assist HRD scholars and practitioners to expand their knowledge about diversity and inform research and scholarship.

The Stakeholders.
Stakeholders invested in this topic include HRD practitioners and scholars, marginalized people, and, more specifically, women and sexual minorities.

Keywords

feminist theory, queer theory, women, lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, gender

Organizations are often marked by heteromasculinity, where heterosexuality and masculinity are dominant and acceptable features of day-to-day functions and interactions (Anderson, 2009; for example, McCormack, 2012). Heteromasculinity is a form of

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masculinity that suppresses women and sexual minorities (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer [LGBTQ]) through the unmediated and unchallenged use of language, understandings, beliefs, or practices that privilege heterosexual men (Anderson, 2009). Feminist theory and queer theory are two theoretical frameworks that interrogate and re-consider these practices as dominant features and their impact in organizations.

We are interested in the normative and exclusive practices in organizations and how these practices reinforce gender (male) and sexuality (heterosexual) privilege. Feminist theory and queer theory reveal powerful and power-filled work structures largely based on heteromasculinist values. We are also interested in forms of resistances, such as feminist and sexual minority social movements, that counteract rigid gender role expectations and gender expression placed on both women and men. Feminist theory and queer theory are interconnected frameworks. Feminist theory and queer theory present organizing frameworks for the study and the practice of Human Resource Development (HRD) because each seeks to understand and then respond to the way systems, structures, policies, processes, and cultures operate to privilege some and suppress others. This practice of inclusion and exclusion has led to significant disenfranchisement among certain social groups. Taken together, feminist theory and queer theory present lenses through which HRD practice and scholarship can be scrutinized and refined to help in the creation of training and development initiatives that reflect thought, equity, and merit that is meaningful and supportive to all workers. In this article, we provide an explanation of feminist theory and queer theory and provide implications for HRD research and scholarship.

Feminist Theory

First coined in France in the 1880s, the term *feminisme* spread throughout Europe in the 1890s and then into North and South America by 1910 (Freedman, 2002). The term is a combination of the French word for woman (femme) and -isme, which "referred to a social movement or political ideology" (Freedman, 2002, p. 3). In the United States, the history of feminist theory has roots in two successive movements of feminism: first wave and second wave.

First wave feminism was characterized by a concern for gender equality. The paradigmatic roots of feminist theory rest in the argument that gender is a social construction based on the assigned sex at birth. The key point is "gender is such a familiar part of daily life that it usually takes a deliberate disruption of our expectations of how women and men are supposed to act to pay attention to how it is produced" (Lorber, 2009, in Disch, 2009, p. 113). Lorber's observation means much more than assigning "pink" colors for girls and "blue" colors for boys; it is about how women and men are assigned different roles, responsibilities, and respect by authority and collegial figures based on their sex in their daily activities. During the second wave of the feminist movement, there was a birth of the academic discipline of women's studies throughout the Western world (Marinucci, 2010). There are two fundamental questions that undergird women's studies: (a) Are women and men social or biological phenomena? and

(b) Are women and men the same, or are they different? (Marinucci, 2010). These questions seek to problematize the notion of the hegemonic binary, which suggests a "normal" man is one who possesses male genitalia, demonstrates masculine behaviors, is sexually dominant, and is attracted to those who possess female genitalia, demonstrate feminine behaviors, and are sexually submissive (Marinucci, 2010). What is significant here is that feminist theory and queer theory are not just related; they are spokes of the same epistemological wheel. A separation of the two theoretical orientations only fractures inclusion and minimizes the potential for meaningful change. They both interrogate the role of gender at the individual level, at the sexual/relational affiliation level, at the organizational level, and at the societal level. One could even argue there is a political dimension to both sets of theory. It is their intertwined history and their conceptual interdependency that form the justification for a consolidated analysis and a corresponding set of recommendations for HRD scholars and practitioners.

Although there is a misconception that feminism and feminist theory is anti-male through its focus on male dominance and masculine attributes such as competitiveness and control (hooks, 2000), feminist theory questions assumptions about privilege and about access. It disrupts the adherence toward the use of categories that position one gender as normal, natural, and neutral (male) versus one gender that is oppositional, subjected, variant, and inferior (female). Feminist theory disrupts the assumption "man" is a natural category and "woman" exists only in relation to man. Put differently, Butler (2006) noted,

> The Symbolic order creates cultural intelligibility through the mutually exclusive positions of "having" the Phallus (the position of men) and "being" the Phallus (the paradoxical position of women) . . . Every effort to establish identity within the terms of this binary distinction of "being" and "having" returns to the inevitable "lack" and "loss" that ground their phantasmatic construction. (p. 60)

This positioning of man and the natural normal category of gender with the qualities (phallus, other male traits and characteristics such as, generally speaking, taller physical height, greater body mass, deeper voice, and other secondary sex characteristics) in contrast to the inferior category of woman provides the scaffolding for feminist theory. The delineation of the sexes, and feminist theory's critique of this practice, is how it becomes mistakenly characterized as anti-male (hooks, 2000) and therefore dismissed as a useful theoretical framework. Butler (1999) further argued gender is continually being reconstituted by a range of repetitive and regulatory acts that operate outside of the self. Gender is not something a person is born with; rather, gender is constructed according to social rules and practices that assign rigid masculine and feminine roles to men and women. Yet, the constructed differences between the sexes has led to oppressive practices such as denial of the right to vote, denial of the right to choose procreative practices (and contraceptive practices), and the assumption women are responsible for the unpaid labor of rearing children and managing a household. These imbalances all provide a foundation to understand how society's struggles

around gender equality and oppression are reproduced in the workplace. In an effort to balance out the inequality, Acker (1990) (in Kimmel, 2004) offered five gendered processes that create gender distinctions and reproduce a gendered order. These processes are as follows: (a) The production of gender divisions, or the ways in which organizational practices produce gender patterns of jobs, pay, hierarchies, power, and subordination; (b) the construction of images that reproduce, suggest, explain, and reinforce gender divisions; these images, for example, reproduce these gendered divisions by depicting successful managers or executives as male; (c) the interactions, including and especially with respect to language, between men and women, that reinforce power and domination; for example, interruptions, sentence completions, and setting the topic for conversation; (d) patterns of speech, dress, and personal presentation, which have the expectation for gender appropriate norms; and (e) the ongoing logic of organizational life itself, which is characterized by seemingly gender-neutral theories of bureaucracy, organizational dynamics, and advancement and promotion criteria, which are gendered criteria masquerading as "objective." The precision set forth by Acker's paradigm is particularly useful because it articulates ways that gender operates as an oppressive mechanism across multiple contexts. It is noteworthy that feminist theory interrogates multiple forms of privilege and that it casts a wide embrace in its efforts to name, and then ideally dismantle, oppression.

Feminist theory has plural interpretations. Feminism is primarily concerned with equality and justice for all women, and it "seeks to eliminate systems of inequality and injustice in all women's lives" (Shaw & Lee, 2004, p. 9). Feminism includes all women in its embrace, and it celebrates the achievements and struggles of women (Shaw & Lee, 2004). Recent versions of feminist theory include in their embrace diverse populations, such as women of color (hooks, 2000), transgender people ("transfeminism"; Salamon, 2008), and effeminate and non-masculine boys and men (Lingard & Douglas, 1999). Scholarly and activist work in these groups can find roots in the three main groups of contemporary feminist thought: liberal feminism, radical feminism, and socialist feminism (Ruth, 2001). Liberal feminism represents classic feminism, concerned with human rights and egalitarian views (Ruth, 2001). Radical feminism

> takes a different tack, reaching deeper into the psychology of the relations of women and men for its explanations . . . It argues that patriarchy, a society built upon masculinist values, as our society is, is hopelessly flawed, aggressive, hierarchical, and violent. (Ruth, 2001, p. 24)

> Socialist feminism posits capitalism creates classes of people, therefore distorting social relations (Ruth, 2001). Recent developments in socialist feminism, namely, (post)colonial feminism, highlight the pervasiveness of colonialism and globalization and their disenfranchising effects on Indigenous populations (e.g., Peden, 2011). These three groups of feminist thought offer ways of thinking about organizational designs, structures, the positionality of the self in organizations, and the corresponding treatment of people within them, and it is conceivable all three streams of feminism can inform a critical examination of HRD because they are all concerned with gender, power, and the way that gendered power relations manifest in the organizational context. Marinucci (2010) noted

that it is the categorization of identities that shapes peoples' expectations for behavior and treatment.

Already, it becomes clear feminism sets up a conceptual and activist template as a frame of reference for queer theory in the way that it first questions assumptions about identity and then shifts private stereotypes, prejudices, inequalities, and limitations into the public sphere. When an organization actively resists unconscious practices that directly affect the access and the opportunities of minorities, it has deleterious consequences for the entire organization and everyone in it. Because much of the oppressive tendencies and practices as they directly and indirectly related to HRD are conducted in ways that are not conscious given the deeply rooted nature of heteromasculinity, much of the oppression happens without conscious intent (Bierema, 2009). Even under the guise of "diversity" and "inclusion," there have been troubling patterns of exclusion. However, when the tacit assumptions about gender identity, gender expression, and sexual orientation (which we subsume into these two mutually informing theories of feminist and queer) are brought to light through the careful writing and reading of a work such as this, it is the awareness that then energizes a sense, one hopes, of responsibility to change the status quo to create policies and practices that are truly inclusive and merit based, and to conduct research that takes off filters of unexamined biases along the lines of these constructs.

An attempt to approach HRD through a feminist theory lens would do the difficult work of identifying underlying norms within organizational structures that reproduce gendered divisions that privilege men. Freedman (2002) noted that "structural discrimination operates through the everyday practices of individuals" (p. 167) and that "discriminatory practices originate in our attitudes about gender" (p. 168). Biases operate at conscious and unconscious levels, and they appear in discernible ways such as income inequality between men and women, as well as the composition of men in senior-level positions in organizations.

In sum, feminists identify and question the assumption a male is the only representation of who is human, natural, and normal. This assumption establishes a social order and indicates who belongs and who has access to all of what makes life good: good jobs, status, position, hope, privilege, and power, which can be accomplished through unfettered access to HRD. As Numer and Gahagan (2009) explained, "Feminist, poststructuralist and queer theories 'deconstruct' power relations by dismantling the norm and promote a politics of change" (p. 155). We now turn our attention to queer theory as a relative of feminist theory.

Queer Theory

Just as women have had to struggle with resisting categories that relegate them in theory, in practice, in society, in the economy, in the political sphere, to second-class status, sexual minorities too have had to wage analogous battles against heteromasculine acts of marginalization and bias (de Lauretis, 1991; Lovaas, Elia, & Yep, 2006; Spargo, 1999). In this section, we elaborate on this point and demonstrate the potential for new streams of thought through the deployment of queer theory.

Historically, the term *queer* has been used to silence, suppress, and shame practices, identities, and values located outside of perceived social boundaries (Butler, 1993). To be referred to as queer meant a person was a symbol of perversion, disdain, sickness, and absurdity. Queer then becomes defined against what is considered *normal* in social practices, identities, and values. The goal here is to establish social regulation so that people govern themselves (and each other) according to what is right/wrong, good/bad, and so forth. The recent reclamation of the term *queer* represents a resistance movement, largely led by academics and activists, to transform the oppressive nature of the term into a positive, political, and preferable depiction of the self, especially for differently gendered individuals (Pinar, 2005). The deployment of queer in this manner is also an attempt to move beyond the hegemonic and historic practice of institutionalized systems using identity-categories (e.g., a "homosexual" identity) to shame, regulate, and eradicate same-sex sexual behavior (Foucault, 1984).

If the term *queer* becomes a marker of a resistance, then "queer theory" forms the theoretical pulse to the movement. The term *queer theory* originated as part of de Lauretis' (1991) scholarly work on lesbian and gay male sexualities. Queer theory is a conceptual framework that "conveys a double emphasis—on the conceptual and speculative work involved in discourse production and on the necessary critical work of deconstructing our own discourses and their constructed silence" (de Lauretis, 1991, p. iv). Queer theory problematizes fixed and stable identity-categories, including male/female, masculine/feminine, and lesbian/gay/straight distinctions, and re-thinks notions of plurality, intersectionality, and fluidity in discourse production. Queer theory posits these categories of "lesbian and gay" or the use of "heterosexual/homosexual" as binary to display heterodominance are social constructions and that they are, as such, artificial. Queer theory attempts to break down the continual use of categories and labels that stereotype and harm those who are in marginalized positions, such as lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) people (de Lauretis, 1991). Queer theory "re-presents" a more fluid concept of gender and sexuality to enhance understanding of human diversity (de Lauretis, 1991). Noting how most indigenous cultures do not have a historical practice of naming and categorizing sexual identities is one example where we question how we have to come to adhere to the use of sexual identity in Western contexts (e.g., Wekker, 2006).

In an alternate view, Pinar (1998) argued queer theory brings sexuality and desire to the fore and engages with a queer pedagogy that examines our positionalities, representations, relations, and needs in relation to a "re-structured self" (p. 9). Pinar (1998) wrote that the introduction of queer theory into educational contexts works to "challenge the reproduction of sameness, of difference, of patriarchy. In different ways we work to teach the same(sexed) as the exemplification, the solidification and mobilization of difference" (p. 10). For Pinar (1998), to integrate queerness into the learning experience means to end silence of sexual identities, knowledge, and values that have long been oppressed in society.

Queer theory introduces the concept of *heteronormativity*, which is a powerful discourse that structures human relations according to heterosexuality. Michael Warner (2002) stated that

a whole field of social relations becomes intelligible as heterosexuality, and this privatized sexual culture bestows on its sexual practices a sense of rightness and normalcy. This sense of rightness—embedded in things and not just in sex—is what we call heteronormativity. (p. 194)

Heteronormativity interferes in individual psyches and social institutions, practices, and knowledge systems as a means to position heterosexuality as the dominant sexuality. For example, heteronormative discourses embedded in training systems lead one to believe that identities (e.g., clients, participants), ideas (e.g., curricula, policy), and relationships (e.g., notions of "family") are exclusively heterosexual, which, concomitantly, silences sexual and gender-difference.

Another hallmark of queer theory is Butler's (1999) notion of *performativity*. Through enlisting gender as the basis for her points, Butler put forth (a) the notion of "performativity" as it relates to the expression of identity and (b) a radical critique of category-generating terms that manage identity. First, Butler drew attention to social practices and rules involved with being and becoming (an individual). Through these social practices and rules, difficulties arise for subjects trying to develop a sense of agency, resistance, and subjectivity around their gender identity. These rules decenter and dismiss individual autonomy and demand that they be adhered to (Butler, 1999). Butler argued gender identity then becomes "performative," whereby individuals "perform" their gender according to these social rules and practices.

Encounters with performativity in this sense suggest that gender identity-categories are fluid and not fixed. Butler and others "trouble" the hegemonic nature of these social rules and practices by exposing them and interrogating the ways in which they construct and bind gender. For example, Connell and Messerschmidt (2005) suggested the notion of "hegemonic masculinity," which asserts that male masculinity is constructed as dominant through social, institutional, and influential rules and that femininity and subordinated masculinity are inferior. It is clear through this work that when people disturb such binding practices around (gender) identity, they then open up political possibilities that break from the constraints of social regulation (Butler, 1999).

In sum, the notions of heteronormativity and performativity as hallmarks of queer theory may be useful in interrogating power structures and "the way that things are done" in the workplace. Recently, queer theory has been critiqued as being too Western in scope, and, as a result, has evolved to include aspects of transnationalism in light of globalized societies (e.g., Gopinath, 2005). This critique has been useful in illustrating how queer theory can be employed as an analytic strategy to destabilize and deconstruct discourse (Kirsch, 2007), such as exploring how intersecting notions of "race," citizenship, gender, class, and sexuality are constructed differently in various settings.

Implications for HRD Scholars and Practitioners

The goal of queer theory and feminist theory is to problematize identity and fixedness based on normalized conceptions of (hetero)sexuality and maleness. This goal poses a

unique quandary in HRD contexts. Some scholars argue that HRD personnel are nervous around engaging with the concept of queer in their work, which has led to silences and absences in management (Bendl, Fleischmann, & Hofmann, 2009), curricula (Chapman & Gedro, 2009), work relationships (Mizzi, 2013), and practice (Hill, 2009). This nervousness results from the historical devaluing of gender- and sexuality-differences that regarded sexual minorities and women as being *different* and the belief that there often is little relevance of queerness to curricula. HRD that is based on homo/transphobic religious values serves as one example where the act of examining queer categorizations and identities in the workplace may be a problem. Significantly, both feminist theory and queer theory are relevant in HRD research and practice because of the (a) assumptions about identity-categories that these theories reject; (b) biases that result from the assumptions about what is "normal" and "natural," and the presumption that the combination of a person's characteristics can be anticipatorily categorized into a fixed nomenclature; and (c) inclusion and exclusion practices that result from these assumptions and biases.

There are three perspectives that emerge when critically exploring HRD through a feminist theory and queer theory lens. First, this perspective would mean that the structures of organizations were questioned in ways that are very real and very practical to all workers. This suggestion could manifest in HRD practices in the following ways: through the selection, which includes the opportunities for preparation, or "grooming" such as stretch assignments and expatriate assignments (see Gedro, 2010, for an in-depth examination of the structural barriers for lesbians in particular, which illuminate both feminist as well as queer theory and HRD) for promotional opportunities; through the design of mentoring and career development programs; through the design of workplace learning initiatives; through organizational change and development endeavors; and through human resource (HR) policies. Examining and then changing HRD practices to reduce or even eliminate inherent biases against sexual minorities have the potential to shift an organizational culture from one of heteromasculine dominance to one that operates on principles of inclusion, respect, and awareness of differences.

Second, using both feminist and queer theory lens in HRD affirms difference and produces non-normative thinking and practicing in educational settings. Even though there is an increase in the use of protective terms in corporate equity policies such as "sexual orientation" and "gender identity," exclusionary practices that marginalize gender and sexual minorities persist. We, then, offer the suggestion that these two theoretical frameworks offer an analysis of a new form of exclusivity that could mean a social reality that falsely claims inclusiveness and, yet, continues with exclusive practices. Queer theory and feminist theory, as subjects for inquiry, serve as warnings about taken for granted categories, systems, and identities that are institutionally and socially defined as well as question the underlying power structures (Bendl et al., 2009).

Third, a queer theory and feminist theory perspective on HRD rejects the notion that training and development efforts are value-free and that everyone in the room is equal. As much as social equality may be a goal, the history of marginalization cannot be ignored and deserves recognition in pedagogical practice. For example, from an LGBT standpoint, Mizzi (2014) pointed out how training exercises for international

aid workers are based on heteronormative assumptions and ignore the intersectionality of identity (race, sexuality, class, gender). Queer theory and feminist theory attempt to break down the continual use of roles, categories, and labels that suppress those who are in marginalized positions, such as LGBT people and LGBT topics. Queer theory and feminist theory bring to the fore those in organizations who transgress normalized boundaries tacitly established by the heteromasculine culture. This means that oppressive notions, such as heteronormativity and performativity, are exposed in HRD work. These notions are interrogated and replaced with curricula that are based on principles of inclusivity, respect, and criticality. This work is especially urgent given the expanding nature of globalization and its influence on workplaces, which will likely give rise to different perceptions of gender and sexuality.

Although the terms *queer theory* and *feminist theory* might have an exotic ring to them, and they may appear to represent the fringes of social, political, and organizational life, the implications that we draw from them for HRD scholarship and practice can be quite concrete. Binary thinking and categorizing and their concomitant responses and results create and maintain organizational structures and systems that, however unintentionally, privilege dominant paradigms of maleness, masculinity, Whiteness, and heterosexuality. The claim that these identities are privileged is by no means rhetorical. Using wages as proxy for equity and access illuminates the unevenness of equity in the labor market in the United States. In 2012, for example, women's median annual earnings for full-time work were US$37,791, compared with men's median annual earnings of US$49,398 (Catalyst, 2014). The weekly earnings for White women were US$722, while for White men, it was US$884 (Catalyst, 2014). For African American men, it was US$664, and for African American women, it was US$606 (Catalyst, 2014). Finally, for Latino men, it was US$594, and for Latino women, it was US$541 (Catalyst, 2014). Income inequality has not been remedied by existing employment laws that prohibit discrimination based upon certain demographic characteristics. There are less visible forces at work that perpetuate this uneven, inequitable status quo. We imagine HRD's response to the ideas set forth in this article to include both the process (who receives the benefits and privileges of HRD) by which HRD work gets done, as well as the content (what gets trained) of HRD initiatives. By *process*, we mean who gets included for high potential assignments? Who gets groomed? What are the criteria for advancement in organizations? By *content*, we mean, what gets "trained" and to what extent is the content culturally inclusive? For example, Gedro, Cervero, and Johnson-Bailey (2004) determined that lesbians who are in managerial, director, and executive-level positions in corporate America have learned to be successful as out lesbians in their organizations not through training and education offered by their HRD departments or any related functions but through informal and incidental learning. Gedro (2014) demonstrated that lesbians who are successful leaders have faced similar self-directed career trajectories. Career development programs that take into account the tapestry, the complexity, and the fluidity of identity are one way of operationalizing queer and feminist theoretical principles. To be even more specific, career development programs that resist stereotyping people based upon their gender or gender expression or their (perceived) sexual orientation or rather that expand the range of possibilities

present a helpful type of resistance to fixed, stable, and oppressive categories of identity.

Leadership development programs that offer opportunities for those motivated, regardless of their identities, present yet another implication for HRD practitioners. In her book, *Lean In*, Sheryl Sandberg (2013) attempted to empower women, for example, by encouraging them to take initiative, to speak up, to resist stereotypically feminine behaviors that limit women's chances of progression in organizations. Although there are opportunities in that particular book to take a broader view of feminist principles (that take into account, for example, race, social class, and sexuality), the book approaches the type of HRD work implicated by this article.

As this article is being written, a *New York Times* article (Miller, 2014) interrogates the stubborn gap between corporate policies intended to create inclusive cultures and the progress toward and presence of LGBT people in senior leadership ranks. In addition, the article offers a sobering status report on the progress of women in senior leadership positions: "Just look at the progress of women and minorities in corporate America, decades after the women's and civil rights movements. Even today, only 48 of the 1,000 largest companies—or 5 percent—have a woman in charge" (Miller, 2014, para. 5). Even though 91 percent of Fortune 500 corporations have policies that prohibit discrimination against sexual minorities, the tendencies persist for sexual minorities to prefer the closet to coming out at work (Miller, 2014). Organizational development initiatives that create deeply inclusive and meritorious corporate cultures are implicated by the continued disproportionate absence of women and sexual minorities in senior positions.

In sum, implicit in this analysis of feminist theory and queer theory, is a likely self-consciousness of the reader, who is perhaps a scholar, or scholar-practitioner. This article illuminates terrain that is, admittedly, contentious and even "under the radar." The moral and professional imperative transcends legal compliance with employment laws that discourage discrimination based upon, ironically, protected categories of people. The irony is that the article has taken pains to disabuse the notion of fixed and stable categories. What we imagine as an ideal outcome of this engagement with the ideas of feminist and queer is that the reader acquires an interest and ability to identify spaces where categories are at play in an organization and where they reify classism, racism, sexism, heterosexism, or any other "ism" that is inevitably limiting.

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