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Abstract:

Research in social psychology reveals that discrimination as a stressor is linked to adverse physical and psychological effects on those targeted, through the effects of cumulative, recurring and often ambiguous incidents. Stress that results from the impact of subtle forms of exclusion and discrimination can give rise to increased illness, loss of productivity and escalating health costs. This article explores how minority and female faculty and staff facing subtle behavioral and organizational barriers to inclusion in the higher education workplace can develop effective coping strategies to deal with these obstacles and how human resource professionals can help those affected by discrimination.

Keywords: Higher Education | Diversity | Inclusion | Discrimination | Personnel Management | Human Resources | Social Psychology

Coping With Behavioral and Organizational Barriers to Diversity in the Workplace

BY ALVIN EVANS AND EDNA BREINIG CHUN

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Research in social psychology reveals that discrimination as a stressor is linked to adverse physical and psychological effects on those targeted, through the effects of cumulative, recurring and often ambiguous incidents. Stress that results from the impact of subtle forms of exclusion and discrimination can give rise to increased illness, loss of productivity and escalating health costs. This article explores how minority and female faculty and staff facing subtle behavioral and organizational barriers to inclusion in the higher education workplace can develop effective coping strategies to deal with these obstacles and how human resource professionals can help those affected by discrimination.

Introduction

Just 50 years after the implementation of Civil Rights legislation, women and minorities in the higher education workplace today face the emergence of subtle and covert forms of discrimination and exclusion. Given the long history of exclusion of minorities in the United States, these new forms of marginalization reflect the widespread consciousness of the potential for the use of legal remedies to address forms of overt discrimination. In the past, human resource professionals have dealt with more blatant acts of discrimination and exclusion. Today, everyday forms of workplace discrimination are exhibited in subtle behavioral and organizational barriers that are much more difficult to identify, but nonetheless recurring and cumulative in impact. These repeated, micro-level forms of marginalization lead to the revolving door, high turnover, deleterious psychological and physical effects upon those who experience discrimination-related stress, and the continual need to recruit and hire new minority and female faculty and staff (Evans & Chun 2007).

Organizational barriers to diversity and inclusion in the higher education workplace can include lack of support, failure to empower and include in decision-making processes, differing expectations, stereotyping, lack of mentoring and access to formal and informal networks, isolation and soloing, and tokenism (Evans & Chun 2007). Behavioral barriers may be displayed in many ways, including micro-level incursions, distancing and avoidance, delegitimization, silencing and other subtle forms of exclusion (Evans & Chun 2007).



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Micro-level incursions are small incidents with large consequences that occur with greater frequency than severe forms of discrimination (Deitch et al. 2003). For example, a supervisor can provide devaluing feedback or messages that undermine an employee's self-esteem and work performance (Young 2003). **Avoidance and distancing** have been shown to indicate negative attitudes toward marginalized groups through nonverbal behaviors such as interpersonal distance, lack of eye contact, and body and shoulder orientation (Word, Zanna & Cooper 2000). **Delegitimization** is another behavioral barrier that can occur when individuals or groups are stereotyped into extremely negative social categories and differences are distorted and amplified (Bar-Tal 1989). **Silencing** occurs when women and minorities are interrupted or not allowed to speak or participate on an equal basis. Just as children were once told to be seen and not heard, even though marginalized groups may be present, they may not have the power to speak (Reinharz 1994). For example, a report examining the number of times female attorneys were interrupted in the courtroom revealed that they were interrupted at least six times more frequently than male attorneys (Reinharz 1994).

Documentable health effects based upon the chronic and ambiguous nature of contemporary forms of discrimination include depression, anxiety, post-traumatic stress disorder and vulnerability to heart disease and other chronic illnesses (Foster & Tsarfati 2005). Prolonged stress can increase susceptibility to autoimmune diseases such as diabetes and myopathy and exacerbate digestive disorders and neurological disease (Sapolsky 1998).

From the perspective of minority and female faculty and staff, awareness of these subtle barriers and the contexts in which they occur can lead to the development of strategies that may be applied to varying circumstances. This article specifically focuses on ways for women and minorities to cope with behavioral barriers in the workplace. We examine findings from social psychological research with a view to applying the results of this empirical research to the higher education environment.

Building a Repertoire of Coping Strategies

How can an individual facing marginalization and exclusion in the workplace begin to build his or her repertoire of coping strategies? One of the first steps for the individual affected by discrimination is to understand conceptually the nature of discrimination and its consequential psychological impact.

The process of exclusion and discrimination has four defining characteristics in terms of its psychosocial effects upon members of stigmatized groups: (1) it increases the frequency and intensity of threats to the self; (2) it instills awareness of the devaluation of one's social identity; (3) it makes the individual aware that others hold stereotypes about his/her social identity; and (4) it elevates stress levels due to the ambiguity derived from uncertainty about the motivation of actions toward stigmatized individuals (Miller & Major 2000).

The second step in developing coping strategies is to recognize when different strategies can be deployed successfully. Coping strategies are a situation-specific means of adapting to the stress caused by perceived discrimination. They are not simply reactive in terms of past circumstances or events, but are proactive and anticipatory (Miller & Major 2000). From this perspective, research has shown that the unpredictability of stressors can increase stress levels (Sapolsky 1998). For example, during the Nazi blitzkrieg of England, London was bombed every night with regularity. Bombings in the suburbs occurred less frequently but also with less predictability. The result was a greater increase in the development of ulcers in the suburban population (Sapolsky 1998). In addition, related experiments have shown that exercising some control over the situation is a powerful way to mitigate stress (Sapolsky 1998).

Adaptive strategies which allow anticipation of stressors through predictability and which permit the individual to have some degree of perceived control will reduce the impact of the stress. In fact, when an individual can appropriately attribute negative outcomes to prejudice, this attribution can serve a self-protective function (Crocker, Voelkl, Testa & Major 1991). In this regard, one study reveals that African-Americans who were prepared by their families to address and deal with racism did not have a significant relation between racist incidents and poorer mental health, unlike those who had lower levels of preparation (Fischer & Shaw 1999).

Since systemic racism has created its own forms of post-traumatic stress syndrome for 15 generations of African-Americans, the transmission of oppression's lessons from one generation to another has resulted in behavioral strategies and resistance knowledge to cope with racial barriers (Feagin 2006). Other first- and second-generation minority immigrants to this country may have had less opportunity to develop these strategies and pass them on to their families (Feagin, personal communication, February 16, 2007).

Types of Coping Strategies

Two major types of coping strategies can be defined: *problem-focused* and *emotion-focused*. Problem-focused strategies involve some type of action to minimize the effects of a problem or situation, and can be directed toward the self, toward others or toward the situation itself (Crocker & Major 1989; Kuo 1995). Emotion-focused strategies assist the individual in regulating or controlling emotions in order to more successfully manage the impact of stress that the problem or situation creates (Crocker & Major 1989). These strategies may be melded, and the distinction between the two is not always clear cut.

Problem-focused strategies. In problem-focused coping directed toward the self, the individual can develop more refined interaction skills and social skills which will assist in achieving goals despite prejudice. These interaction skills include the ability to detect subtle behavioral and situational cues (Miller & Kaiser 2001). By blending the notion of predictability and anticipation with the ability to change behaviors in a socially skillful fashion, the individual can adjust more quickly and mitigate the impact of prejudice. Much like a chess game in which the moves are anticipated and plotted in advance, minorities and women who are aware of and can predict situational challenges are positioned to deploy higher order social and interactional skills to deflect the impact of discrimination.

Problem-focused strategies directed toward situations can aim at structuring the situation to reduce or avoid the opportunity for marginalization. For example, in some cases an individual may be able to structure a situation so as not to be isolated as the solo or token and dilute the tendency for others to attribute his or her behavior to this status. Similarly, in problem-focused strategies directed at others, individuals can participate in efforts to change external conditions and reduce or eliminate devaluation. Examples of these strategies are participation in civil rights activities or attempts to create legislative or judicial remedies to injustice.

Within the higher education workplace, a problem-focused strategy would be to build a network of alliances which strengthens one's ability to withstand and effectively manage day-to-day workplace discrimination. Participation in campus-based minority focus groups is an example of a problem-based approach. Through resource or support groups, individuals can overcome a sense of isolation and uniqueness and obtain needed support.

Another problem-focused strategy reported by a minority faculty member to counteract marginalization was to focus more attention on her achievements in the national arena and ignore the lack of respect in her own department (Thomas & Hollenshead 2001).

Emotion-focused strategies. Controlling the emotions so as not to directly express anger or frustration represents an important approach to de-escalating a situation that might otherwise result in undesirable outcomes. Humor, sarcasm and concealment of real thoughts from the oppressor have been ways that African-Americans have survived under the threat of retaliation and violence from white oppressors (Feagin 2006). Minorities and women also need to combat the internalization of negative images or stereotypes that can result in self-fulfilling prophecy (Feagin & McKinney 2003).

One interesting study of 499 Asian-American residents of Seattle revealed that Asian-Americans are more likely to use intrapsychic, emotion-focused strategies such as reconceptualization of problems and avoidance to deal with racial discrimination (Kuo 1995).

While the study emphasizes that Asian Americans are not a homogenous group in terms of reactions to racial discrimination, traditional Asian cultural values that emphasize personal responsibility for success as well as the importance of compromise, conciliation and adaptation in the face of conflict may influence the choice of emotion-focused strategies (Kuo 1995). Since a greater degree of awareness of minority status often accompanies the use of emotion-focused coping, the findings of this study suggest that this choice may also be based upon an assessment of the risks of direct confrontation (Kuo 1995).

Effective Coping Strategies

Effective coping strategies employ a variety of mechanisms to address the challenges presented by perceived discrimination. Cognitive restructuring is an adaptive strategy that enables the individual to redefine the meaning of stressful and threatening events. Forms of cognitive restructuring can include devaluing the domains upon which stereotypes are made or reframing thoughts by understanding and interpreting patterns of behavior (Miller & Kaiser 2001). Thinking differently about an event or situation can enable the person to contextualize its meaning within a broader framework of understanding. This broader framework helps the individual refrain from dwelling unnecessarily on details and from overreacting to situations.

Depersonalization is an effective coping strategy since it allows the individual subjected to subtle discrimination to understand that similarly situated persons would experience the same thing. If the individual is a solo or token, the process of generalization and depersonalization becomes more difficult. Depersonalization creates distance from an experience and places an event within an objective and intelligible framework. As such, it can be viewed as a successful form of cognitive restructuring.

Spiritual sources and cultural values often provide critical support to many minorities and women facing discrimination. For example, Africultural coping or behaviors that reflect the values of an African-centered philosophical framework based on spirituality, harmony and balance provide a culture-specific resource to buffer the psychological effects of racism (Lewis-Coles & Constantine 2006).

An important question for minorities and women is whether or not directly challenging discrimination can be an effective coping strategy. Potential dangers may arise if, for example, a complaint of discrimination is against someone in power who controls important resources (Kaiser & Miller 2001b). The outcome, as demonstrated in several studies, could be retaliation and negative treatment, and individuals must decide if the cost of claiming discrimination will be worth the consequences (Kaiser & Miller 2001b).

A study of more than 200 undergraduates provides specific evidence of the social costs of making claims of discrimination, since the participants devalued an African-American male who attributed his failure to discrimination, viewed him as a complainer and were insensitive to the amount of discrimination he faced even when clear prejudice was shown (Kaiser & Miller 2001b). Despite the amount of discrimination the individual faced, he was seen as more emotional, hypersensitive, argumentative, trouble-making and irritating (Kaiser & Miller 2001b). This study illuminates the risks and reactions that can accompany claims of discrimination. The stigmatized individual can become typecast and seen as a troublemaker or a liability. The consequences and way of introducing information about discrimination must be considered in light of potential negative personal evaluations that may result.

In this regard, research findings indicate that women often do not directly confront the perpetrators of blatant discrimination or even tell members in positions of authority or higher status that they have been discriminated against (Swim & Hyers 1999, as cited in Kaiser & Miller 2004). Through a process of cognitive appraisal, individuals judge whether events are potentially harmful or beneficial, as well as one's own ability to cope with the event and increase the likelihood of success in dealing with the event (Kaiser & Miller 2004). Women and minorities facing perceived discrimination often use cognitive appraisals to determine the costs and benefits of directly confronting prejudice. Since the most commonly documented obstacle to confronting discrimination is the interpersonal cost, women tend to avoid confronting sexism for fear of retaliation or being perceived as hypersensitive (Kaiser & Miller 2004).

To counteract perceived discrimination, the individual must bring into play a variety of strategies to assist in successfully meeting the challenge. These flexible and situation-specific strategies will assist the individual in the maintenance of normal, healthy self-esteem. While researchers have identified the importance of cognitive appraisal, situations often arise with only moments or seconds in which to respond. As a result, understanding the dynamics of subtle discrimination in advance and rehearsing or practicing responses will enable women and minorities to respond quickly and effectively.

The theory of behavioral immunization counteracts the learned helplessness that results when individuals believe that outcomes are uncontrollable. This theory rests upon the notion of controlling trauma and protecting the individual from helplessness by forming a cognitive representation of the situation and responding through behavior. A sense of competence also helps avoid the fear and depression caused by helplessness (Seligman 1975). The value of counteracting learned helplessness lies in developing a course of action or response based upon learning about a situation, rather than simply giving up.

Compensation for prejudice is essentially a form of behavioral immunization that is proactive and anticipatory in nature. For example, one study of 134 female undergraduate students found that women who were forewarned of impending prejudice conveyed less stereotypically feminine impressions on written essays (Kaiser & Miller 2001a). This research indicates that women who knew about pre-existing stereotypes distanced themselves from these stereotypes to mitigate the effects of sexism. Instead of waiting for negative outcomes to appear, the women took steps to address the impact of pre-existing assumptions.

Finally, self-blame in situations of discrimination may encourage members of disadvantaged groups to maintain their own oppression and internalize it through a form of hegemony. Self-blame can result in acceptance of one's lower social status and promote actions that sustain the status quo rather than improve situations of systemic discrimination (Foster, Matheson & Poole 2001).

Conclusion

In reviewing the array of strategies available to women and minorities, the literature suggests that awareness of potential discrimination in the workplace is a prerequisite to developing effective coping strategies and inoculating individuals against the impact of perceived discrimination. A multiplicity of behavioral tools and approaches is needed. Gauging the specific situation (gaining information), not overreacting to it (emotional control) and developing a plan of action to counteract "learned helplessness" are important ways to ensure an appropriate response.

To successfully develop coping and adaptive strategies, preparation provides a clear advantage in terms of timing, practice and anticipation of behavioral obstacles. The research cited in this article validates the need for women and minorities to think through potential strategies in advance to counteract subtle discrimination in the workplace. In examining the repeated and frequent challenges to self-esteem posed by behavioral barriers, a strong reservoir of internal psychological resources is needed to mitigate the stressful impact of discriminatory situations.

The role of human resource professionals is twofold in terms of the issues addressed in this article. First, in order to optimize the talent of faculty and staff in support of institutional excellence as well as attain appropriate representation of women and minorities at all levels of the organization, human resource professionals need to assist institutional leadership in transforming institutional culture to be more welcoming, inclusive and supportive. Until this transformation occurs, human resource professionals can assist minorities and women through building networks, establishing support groups, creating mentoring programs, developing wellness and health-related resources and designing professional development activities that strengthen their capacity to cope successfully with behavioral and organizational barriers to diversity.

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