

“Tired of Choosing”: Working with the Simultaneity of Race, Gender, and Class in Organizations

For the last seven years, we at the Center for Gender in Organizations at the Simmons School of Management have explored complex models of gender that take into account the interactions of race, gender, and class in organizations. My own experience as a woman of color, a Latina, a Puerto Rican in the United States, consulting and researching on issues of equality and change in organizations, has helped me understand the importance of “complicating gender.”¹ It has also motivated me to look for new ways of conceptualizing and applying more encompassing models of identity in organizations, because I have experienced firsthand how traditional, one-dimensional models of identity fail to account for the many aspects of my own identity.

Many scholars have contributed to the goal of complicating gender by bringing in the experiences and voices of women of color and other non-dominant groups such as in the relatively

new field of queer studies. Today there is a considerable body of knowledge on the intersections of race, gender, class, and other dimensions of difference.² In organizations, these insights about the complex nature of identity and its particular effect on women of color are just beginning to appear, as demonstrated by the growth in number of nationwide conferences for

women of color³ and of studies that shed light on the different situation of women of color when compared with that of white women in organizations.⁴

In this article I discuss a model based on the simultaneity of race, gender, class, and other social differences to illuminate organizational dynamics in diversity change efforts. Using a case study from my practice, I demonstrate how this model was used to support organizational change in consulting to an employee network.⁵ I also identify some of the challenges of the model’s application and the benefits it promises for individuals and for organizations.

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What Is Simultaneity and Why Is it Important?: A Re-Conceptualization of Differences

Most diversity change efforts in organizations, such as employee resource groups, are based on dominant models of identity that treat differences as essential, innate, fixed, independent, and additive variables. These models of differences lead to what Joan Scott has aptly termed the equality-differences dilemma⁶: if people are inherently different, then how can they be equal? Conversely, if people are equal, why do we need to focus on and address the differences among us? Thus, many times there is heated debate in organizations about whether employee groups such as a women’s network or an African American caucus are good for the organization. For a woman of color, these models force her to choose between dimensions of her identity such as her gender and her race/ethnicity: “I’m a woman” or “I’m Puerto Rican” rather than “I’m a Puerto Rican woman.” Having to make this choice creates a kind of identity schizophrenia where a woman of color has to deny a major part of her life experience. The choice of which part of her identity to privilege often varies by context, adding to the problematic dynamic.

To escape the bind created by these simplistic models of identity, I advocate a simultaneity model, which is based on the following premises:⁷

- Differences are relational and socially constructed, not innate and fixed, and they depend on having an opposite. For example, “Latino” as a category of identity came about in the 1960s to provide an alternative to the dichotomous white and Black census categories prevalent in the U.S. at the time.⁸
- Social differences signal unequal relations of power among members of different groups in the larger society. Whites as a group have more power than other racial groups; men have more power than women.
- We each belong to a variety of identity groups and share multiple and sometimes contradictory identities. For example, as a Hispanic woman I am disadvantaged by my race and ethnicity, but privileged by my U.S. citizenship.

zenship, my heterosexuality, and my professional social class.

- Differences and the identities constructed based on them are interdependent and always interacting. For example, the stereotypes of white women are not the same as those of Black or Native American women because gender, race, ethnicity, and class interact in ways that construct images that are particular to each of these identity groups, even though they are all women.⁹
- Identities and differences are contextual and, depending on the situation, some dimensions of one's identity come to be figural and others become background. When I work in Puerto Rico, for example, my Puerto Ricaness is less figural, and so I become much more aware of the gender dynamics between Puerto Rican men and women.

It is important to complicate our models of identity and differences by changing the premises we hold about how differences interact. In addition, it is important to analyze how the simultaneous processes of race, gender, class, sexuality, and nationality interact on three major levels: 1) an individual's identity; 2) the organization's structure, procedures, and norms; and 3) the structures and beliefs of the societal context in which the individual and organization are located. The following case study shows how I used the simultaneity model in an action research project¹⁰ with an employee network in a Fortune 500 organization.

Applying the Simultaneity Model: The Case of the WOCN

I was called by members of a recently formed Women of Color Network (WOCN)¹¹ to help improve the way they were working together to attain their goals. For this project I interviewed a representative sample of members of the WOCN, analyzed their responses, and looked for common themes and differences in three general areas: what was supporting their work; what was hindering their work; and what suggestions they had for improving their ways of working to have a positive impact within the organization. I presented a summary of my findings and recommendations to the WOCN Executive Committee in a face-to-face meeting. A year later, another inquiry was conducted to assess what had been accomplished, determine what else was needed, and consolidate learnings.

In this inquiry process, I found that the WOCN members agreed on four key factors that supported their work: 1) clarity and commitment to their goals; 2) conviction about the reasons for coming together as a group; 3) major accomplishments; and 4) support of the group's leadership. For example, all the women agreed that one of their major accomplishments had been to "put the issues of women of color on the table." Through their work, the organization came to understand that the situation of women of color was much more disadvantaged than that of white women in regard to salaries, advancement

opportunities, representation in high-level positions, participation in and leadership of key projects, and their concentration in staff versus line positions.

Areas where there was less agreement and that the WOCN members identified as major challenges to their ability to work effectively together were: 1) organizing and leading the group; 2) keeping momentum and delivering on their various goals; 3) securing commitment and support from top management; and 4) surviving an organizational merger that visibly reduced the already few women of color in top management positions.

In my work with the WOCN, I identified three important issues that directly relate to the simultaneity of race, gender, ethnicity, and class. These issues needed to be addressed in order to support the survival and work of the group moving forward. The following are questions the group had to answer and manage on an ongoing basis. I also highlight the relation of these questions to the three levels of simultaneity analysis mentioned earlier – individual, organizational, and societal – and suggest how these questions reflect some of the challenges and the promises of applying a simultaneity model in organizations.

The first broad question for the group was, "How does the WOCN become a cohesive group with a unified goal while acknowledging the differences and multiplicity of identities and interests among its members?" In other words, how do women of color resolve their own gender schisms?¹² This was one of the initial problems that got the group to ask for my help as an external consultant — they wanted to know how to better manage their internal differences. We specifically explored this question in a short exercise during a WOCN meeting: the women were divided into same-racial/ethnic groups and asked to identify one difficult question they had for each other in their same-race group and one difficult question they had for one of the other racial/ethnic groups.¹³

Some members initially expressed resistance to doing the exercise — they thought it seemed divisive as well as unnecessary because women of the same racial group thought they knew each other well enough already. Nevertheless, after the discussion, many commented on the power of exploring the differences they had discovered among themselves and with the other groups. Among the Latinas, for example, one of the members asked with tears in her eyes, "Do you accept me in this group even if I look white?" The question provided the opportunity to discuss the painful and seldom talked-about subject of color and racial differences among Latinas. A question discussed among all groups, revealing important differences among African Americans, Latinas, and Asians was, "How do you do activism in this organization and to what level of risk will you get involved?" The expectation that all women of color show their activism and commitment to the women of color cause in a similar way was generating judgments of each other and divisions within the group, which after this exploration were easier to dispel.

Instead of denying their differences, the model of simultaneity asked the WOCN members to explore these differences by asking difficult questions about their complex identities rather than relying on their assumed similarities. As a result of accepting some of the differences among them that were impacting how they felt toward each other and the task, there was a deeper connection among the women that helped the group work more effectively and with more energy to accomplish their joint goal.

The second question the group confronted was, “Is a dual agenda of driving change and supporting the career development of women of color appropriate for an employee network in this organization?” This dual agenda was not supported by all members of the top management team or by all the WOCN members. In this case, the group needed to understand and address the organizational-level assumptions and diversity agendas that suggested they function in the same way as other employee networks.

Generally, the goals of employee networks are three: 1) to encourage the professional development of their members; 2) to support the organization in identifying and recruiting employees like them; and 3) to give back to the special communities these employees represent and thus enhance the external image of the organization.

But the WOCN wanted to go beyond this more traditional definition of the goals of an employee network — they also wanted to drive organizational change for the benefit of women of color and the organization as a whole. Some managers thought this latter goal was beyond the scope of what an employee network should do. However, from a simultaneity perspective, nothing less could be expected from a group of women of color, who are so aware of the organizational inequities they face and the relation these have to larger socio-historical inequities.

The third and last question the WOCN examined was, “What is the ‘value added’ of the WOCN and does the existence of this group diminish the effectiveness and strength of other established employee networks in the organization?” The WOCN was under pressure to prove that it was delivering specific and different results than those of other employee groups — the expectation seemed to be that women of color should work on their issues in existing networks such as the women’s network or other race-based affiliate groups. In other words, the unspoken expectation was that women of color would

choose only one aspect of their identities to affiliate around. But while the women of color belonged to and coordinated many of their activities with other established employee networks, they were also clear on the need for a group that would specifically and consistently address their unique needs as *both* women *and* of color. Much of this pressure was coming from members of the white women’s group (dominant on race/ethnicity) and other race-based groups dominated by men. This pressure needed to be understood in the context of a broader societal discourse of diversity that segments, prioritizes, and “tolerates” *some* differences, but does not recognize the complexity and impact of multiple identities that women of color represent. As a white woman interviewee put it, “it requires a conceptual leap I am not sure many can make” to understand the unique position of women of color and to be able to support their existence as a differentiated interest group and an employee network in its own right.

The recommendations I made to the WOCN were based on the application of the simultaneity model. I recommended that the WOCN re-affirm their mission to support women of color and to help drive change in the organization, in spite of the apparent resistance they were encountering for such an expanded agenda. New objectives and priorities would need to be identified and additional strategies designed to gather the support of key stakeholders for this dual agenda.

By differentiating among women of different racial and ethnic backgrounds and addressing their unique needs, organizations will be better able to deploy their talent and gain their full commitment.

Conclusion: The Benefits of Recognizing Simultaneity

Differences and the social relations of race, ethnicity, gender, class, sexuality, and nationality are complex, simultaneous processes of identity and organizational and social practice. Organizational members and change agents need to recognize this complexity as it is manifested at the individual, organizational, and societal levels in order to promote social equality and increased performance in organizations. Everyone needs to assume their responsibility in owning to and identifying these processes.

At the individual level, the gain from acknowledging simultaneity is that women of color do not have to parcel out their identity by choosing which dimension of difference to privilege, and therefore they can feel and behave whole. For members of dominant groups, like white women, the opposite will be possible — they will not have to deny parts of their identities that often remain subsumed and unrecognized because of their exclusive focus on gender.

For organizations, the major gain of using a simultaneity model lies in securing a better and more realistic picture of the situation of their women employees, including their top executives and leaders. In addition, by differentiating among women of diverse racial and ethnic backgrounds and addressing their unique needs, organizations will be better able to deploy these women’s talents and gain their full commitment. At the societal level, simultaneity will help us develop more

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tolerance and respect for the complexity of humanity and the richness of our social systems.

Still, many questions remain. Thus, I would like to encourage the reader to think about what it would mean for you, as a member of your particular racial/ethnic, gender, sexuality, age, and national group, to embrace simultaneity.

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Endnotes

¹“Complicating gender” refers to exploring the racialized and classed dimensions of gender in order to get to a more complete understanding of women and their situation(s). See Holvino, E. 2001. CGO Working Paper No. 14: *Complicating Gender: The Simultaneity of Race, Gender, and Class in Organization Change(ing)*. Boston, MA: Center for Gender in Organizations, Simmons School of Management; and Holvino, E. Forthcoming. Intersections: The simultaneity of race, gender, and class in organization studies. *Gender, Work and Organization*.

²See for example Collins, P.H. 2000. *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment* (2nd Edition). New York: Routledge; Friedman, S.S. 1998. *Mappings: Feminism and the Cultural Geographies of Encounter*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press; and Hurtado, A. 2003. *Voicing Feminisms: Young Chicanas Speak Out on Sexuality and Identity*. New York: New York University Press.

³For example, Working Mother Media’s Women of Color Conferences and Town Halls throughout the nation (2002-2006) and Spelman College’s Leadership Conference on Women of Color (2003-2006).

⁴Catalyst. 1999. *Women of Color in Corporate Management: Opportunities and Barriers*. New York: Catalyst; and Catalyst. 2002. *Women of Color in Corporate Management: Three Years Later*. New York: Catalyst.

⁵Also known as affiliate groups, employee resource groups, and employee networks, these groups bring together people who share similar identities along dimensions such as gender, race, disability, and sexuality on a volunteer basis. The groups are formally sanctioned by an organization in order to support its diversity change strategy. See Bye, P.L. 2003. Best practices for employee resource groups. *The Diversity Factor*, 11(2): 7-11.

⁶Scott, J.W. 1988. Deconstructing equality vs. difference: Or, the uses of post-structuralist theory for feminism. *Feminist Studies*, 14(1):33-50.

⁷See also Holvino, E. 2003. Theories of differences: Changing paradigms for organizations. In D.L. Plummer (Ed.), *Handbook of Diversity*

Management: Beyond Awareness to Competency Based Learning. Lanham, MD: University Press of America, pp. 111-132.

⁸Quiñones-Rosado, R. 1998. Hispanic or Latino? The struggle for identity in a race-based society. *The Diversity Factor*, 6(4): 20-24; and Cruz-Janzen, M.I. 2002. Lives on the crossfire: The struggle of multi-ethnic and multiracial Latinos for identity in a dichotomous and racialized world. *Race, Gender & Class*, 9(2): 47.

⁹See for example McRae, M. 2003. *CGO Commentaries* No. 2: How do I talk to you, my white sister? Boston, MA: Center for Gender in Organizations, Simmons School of Management.

¹⁰“Action research is a collaborative approach to organizational change that focuses on joint inquiry and learning between internal and external change agents.” Merrill-Sands, D. and Holvino, E. with Cumming, J. 2000. CGO Working Paper No. 11: *Working with Diversity: A Focus on Global Organizations*. Boston, MA: Center for Gender in Organizations, Simmons School of Management, p. 53. See also Rapoport, R., Bailyn, L., Fletcher, J., and Pruitt, B. 2002. *Beyond Work-Family Balance: Advancing Gender Equity and Workplace Performance*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.

¹¹All identifying details have been changed to protect confidentiality.

¹²“Gender schisms” denotes a divide that exists among women in spite of their commonality as women. It usually refers to the differences between white women and Black women and the schism of racism that divides them, where white women do not recognize their privilege as white people and Black women insist on that recognition. I am interested in expanding the notion of “schisms” to include those differences between white women and women of color as a group as well as among women of color with each other. See Holvino, E. 2005. *CGO Commentaries* No. 5: Women in organizations: Why our differences matter and what to do about it. Boston, MA: Center for Gender in Organizations, Simmons School of Management; and Holvino, E. and Sheridan, B.A. 2003. *CGO Insights* No. 17: Working across differences: Diversity practices for organizational change. Boston, MA: Center for Gender in Organizations, Simmons School of Management. See also Cole, J.B. and Guy-Sheftall, B. 2003. *Gender Talk: The Struggle for Women’s Equality in African American Communities*. New York: Ballantine Books; and Jones C. and Shorter-Gooden, K. 2003. *Shifting: The Double Lives of Black Women in America*. New York: HarperCollins.

¹³See Proudford, K. 2002. *CGO Insights* No. 14: Asking the question: Uncovering the assumptions that undermine conversations across race. Boston, MA: Center for Gender in Organizations, Simmons School of Management.

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