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# Diversity Management: An Emerging Employment/Consulting Opportunity for Sociological Practitioners

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## ABSTRACT

Diversity management is examined as an emerging employment and/or consulting role of possible interest to sociological practitioners. First, the general development of diversity management since the mid-1980s is traced. Demographic imperatives for diversity management as well as some definitions, emphases, procedures, and publications are identified. Second, the linkages between diversity management and sociology/sociologists are discussed, as to: (a) substantive connections, (b) special sociological insights, (c) training suggestions, and (d) corporate involvement issues.

In recent years a new role has been emerging that might be of interest to some sociological practitioners: diversity management. Conceived from a combination of demographic trends, business needs, and employee realities, it was identified as a "hot track" occupational field in *U.S. News and World Report's* "1992 Career Guide" (Editors, 1991). This paper asks: What is diversity management and what is its relationship to sociology and the sociologist? In doing so, we continue our exploration of linkages between sociological practice and older and newer occupations (Friedman, 1987; Friedman & Friedman, 1987).

## The Emergence of Diversity Management

In the mid-1980s, census and other demographic reports began to portray the coming of a more diverse American labor force by the year 2000. This labor force will contain a decreasing percentage of white males and increasing percentages of women, minorities, immigrants, the aged, and the disabled. By the year 2000, for instance, the labor force will contain an estimated 25% minority and 47% female workers (Ehrlich, 1988; Johnston & Packer, 1987). (More recent projections show whites making up 78.6% of the labor force in 1990 but only 73% by 2005, with percentage increases of entering workers from 1990 to 2005 higher among women, African-Americans, Hispanics, and Asian-Americans than among white males. See Kutscher, 1991, pp. 6-7.)

In the mid-1980s, various writers, organizers, and human resources and management specialists began to speak of the resulting growing need to "manage" this "culturally diverse workforce." For instance, the pioneering American Institute for Managing Diversity was founded in 1984 as a research and consulting center at Morehouse College in Atlanta.

Emerging definitions of and emphases in diversity management by the early 1990s somewhat varied, and were still multiple and in flux. They have usually included one or more of the following thrusts: (1) appreciate and value the plural cultural and other differences among diverse workers; (2) remove racism and sexism from the dominant corporate culture and practices, thus making diverse workers a more integral part of the total organizational effort; (3) follow up affirmative action recruits now working in the organization, to see that they are further understood and accepted, encouraged, motivated, and promoted; (4) recognize that the above and related company activities are "good for business," are business necessities that will help diverse workers to become more content, effective, successful, and productive participants in an increasingly competitive global economy.

Gradually, by the late 1980s and early 1990s, numerous major corporations had invited consultants in diversity management to assess their diversity workforce-related situations and practices. As a result, special programs and new or reassigned internal positions (cultural diversity management coordinators and directors) were sometimes established and set into motion.

Procedures of diversity management have ranged from 1-day workshops to elaborate 5-year company programs. Often there were initial visits and assessments by a consultant who provided a diagnosis of the organization's present condition.

Various subsequent management of diversity programs and remedies have included special presentations to workers (including seminars and videotapes) about culturally diverse groups, prejudice and discrimination, interpersonal and intergroup relations among workers, etc. Special workers' committees, focus group sessions, mentorships, and minority interest associations have sometimes been developed. Among the special company issues diversity management consultants and coordinators have grappled with have been child care and other family services, minority promotion rates, and special flexible plural ethnic, religious, and health needs of diverse workers. (For descriptions of numerous specific and concrete diversity management procedures, techniques, cases, presentations, programs, and emphases, that have involved various companies, see Dreyfus, 1990; Fernandez, 1991; Hanamura, 1989; Lewis, 1992; Loden & Rosener, 1991; Mabry, 1990; Seal, 1991; Thomas, 1991; White, 1992; Wolford, 1991.)

By 1990, diversity management activities had become widespread and noticeable enough to warrant feature stories about them in mass publications like *Newsweek* (Mabry, 1990) and *Fortune* (Dreyfus, 1990). And in 1991, at least three book-length treatments of diversity management were published: *Beyond Race and Gender: Unleashing the Power of Your Total Work Force by Managing Diversity* (Thomas 1991), *Workforce America! Managing Employee Diversity as a Vital Resource* (Loden & Rosener, 1991), and *Managing a Diverse Work Force: Regaining the Competitive Edge* (Fernandez, 1991). Clearly, diversity management had "arrived."

Nevertheless, the idea was still somewhat new and untried and evolving by 1991 and 1992. According to one estimate (Lawlor, 1992, p. 2B), about 75% of *Fortune* 1000 companies by 1992 recognized diversity as an issue that they felt they ought to address, but only about one third of them had undertaken any specific program activities.

To give some idea of how emerging diversity management still was in some places and companies, an interview we conducted in December 1991 with a human resources executive employed in the regional headquarters of one of the largest banking chains in southern California revealed that: (1) there was much buzz-word talk of workforce diversity in the region but not much action to date in the chain; (2) only one 1-shot seminar/workshop/consultation had taken place, given by an anti-defamation-type agency, and no diversity management employees had yet been hired, though one had been hired in the chain's northwestern United States region; (3) local top decision makers in the chain to date viewed affirmative action more approvingly (than diversity management), as a more quantitative and ac-

countable effort, while diversity management in turn was much less approvingly perceived thus far, as a less tangible, more qualitative, and too “touchy-feely” set of activities.

Recent events in 1992, though, seemed to underscore the need for more diversity management, especially the April riots in Los Angeles and other cities. One (nonsociologist) diversity management consulting firm in Los Angeles, for instance, subsequent to the riots wrote a piece titled “Rebuild L.A.!” in a local employment weekly (Gardenswartz & Rowe, 1992) that suggested to readers that they:

Be open to and honestly value the diverse culture of Los Angeles. Even though some people are fed up and want to leave L.A. after the riots, far more citizens want to stay and make it work (p. 14).

That observation was then followed with the note that their firm “may be contacted to help your company deal with the issues surrounding cultural diversity in the workplace.”

### **The Sociological Connection**

Diversity management has mainly been defined and developed as a new area within personnel work/human resource management (HRM) since the mid-1980s. (Secondarily, it was a growing interest in general management; the American Academy of Management, for instance, featured it as a theme of its 1992 annual meeting.) A good case can be made that HRM is the most sociologically related and relevant of all the specialized areas of business. It is the most expressly people-oriented aspect, and has included the personnel subspecialties of employment recruiting and placement, training and development, compensation and benefits, employee and labor relations, and health/safety/security, among others. In more recent years, affirmative action and corporate child-care provisions have often been carried out by HRM departments. Many sociology graduates who have taken jobs in business (and the public sector) over the years have gravitated toward HRM personnel-work positions.

But the substantive emphases in diversity management appear to be even more centrally sociological than those of most other aspects of HRM (such as compensation or labor law). The knowledge needed in diversity management revolves

around culturally and socially diverse groups (minorities, women, the aged, the disabled, etc.) and around the dynamics of work and workers.

Aspects of these considerations are academically addressed extensively in college courses in sociology that are about diversity and work. Diversity topics are discussed in such courses as racial and ethnic relations/groups, sociology of gender, and sociology of aging. In regard to ethnic group and cultural "pluralism" (compared with assimilation), sociology has probably probed this topic longer and deeper than any other field of study (see, e.g., Friedman, 1985). Worker issues are considered in such courses as work and occupations, industrial sociology, complex organization, economic sociology, and demography. Within these courses such relevant subtopics as child care, racial discrimination, gender role conflict, worker satisfaction, and organizational change are customarily treated. Thus a good case can be made that sociology courses are highly pertinent ones for diversity management.

In regard to this sociology relevancy, one of the 1991 books cited about diversity management was *Managing the Diverse Work Force* by John F. Fernandez. Fernandez has a PhD in sociology and, among other topics, deals in his book with demographic and workplace changes, bureaucracy, racism, sexism, economic competition with other countries, profiles of various groups (women, African-Americans, Native Americans, Hispanics, Asian-Americans, the aged, etc.), workplace discrimination, white male responses, and how employers can attempt to make their workers more economically competitive through diversity management.

Sociological knowledge can bring some of its own special strengths to diversity management. One is caution about *overgeneralizing* about the cultural differences of groups. Sociologists know that there are often as many or more cultural/behavioral differences *within* large groups as there are differences *between* them. And these differences within a group are frequently more based on generation, social class, time of arrival and degree of structural assimilation, political, and/or individual experiential diversities than upon some oversimplified portrait of rigid and unchanging group cultural characteristics. Certainly this is true about such groups as African-Americans, Hispanics, and Asian-Americans. Sociological expertise about social structural and social psychological aspects of diverse groups and workers is a valuable special addition we have to our knowledge about more strictly cultural characteristics.

Sociology bachelor's, master's, and PhD degree programs, with the needed course areas, are therefore highly appropriate current and future academic prepa-

rations for various-level roles in diversity management employment (company coordinators, directors) and consulting. We assume, not rigidly, that PhDs would usually be consultants, bachelor's holders corporate employees, and master's recipients either or both. Ideally, supplementary interdisciplinary coursework in such fields as HRM, general management, and instructional design/training would be helpful as well. While minority and female sociology graduates would probably be in highest special demand for diversity management (as is the case with affirmative-action officer positions), there are no substantive or rational reasons why white males (who are also a part of the concept and reality of total workforce diversity) should not also serve in diversity management. In some cases a white male's presentations and recommendations about minority cultures and workers might even be less threatening and more persuasive to, and therefore perhaps more heeded by, largely white male employees and managers than those of a minority person or a woman.

Another sociological consideration is that some sociological practitioners might be reluctant to engage in employment or consulting that requires that they fit into a pre defined role in or on behalf of a corporation. Of course, those with a totally anti-business/capitalism orientation probably would not or should not pursue diversity management activities. In broad definition, the emerging role that has been defined *is* managerial in perspective rather than altruistic, that is, designed and intended primarily and ultimately to improve corporate smooth operations, productivity, and competitiveness. As one influential figure in the development of the field has written (Thomas, 1991):

here was an unfilled need: to understand . . . the managerial experience of managers with blacks and women so that insights could be gained as to how white males might better manage them. I defined management as the use of various managerial tools to enable people to practice the behavior required for achieving corporate objectives. Here more was meant than race relations or interpersonal relations. Beyond these matters were the issues of creating an appropriate corporate culture and set of organizational systems (p. xiv).

It should be pointed out, however, that among business and management-based and defined roles, diversity management does include considerable implicit and indirect concern for a relative "underdog": the diverse worker. It asks that the organization consider some adaptations *to* (rather than only *from*) these workers in

regard to their plural values, behaviors, special needs, and opinions. In its goal of attempting continually to take into account and respond to the views of these workers, it is in the industrial democracy/participative management tradition of greater receptivity to non manager input and morale. (Also, most sociologists today probably ideologically agree with the working assumption in diversity management that it is a "good" thing to integrate minorities into the economic mainstream while also encouraging them, if they desire, to maintain some aspects of their plural ethnic heritages.) These characteristics of diversity management, in combination with its still embryonic, in-the-process-of-becoming state, should be attractive to many current and future sociological practitioners.

## Conclusion

Diversity management, then, is an emerging role that will probably be growing in the foreseeable future. Since its core concerns about group and cultural diversity and workplace/workforce dynamics are also so substantively central to sociology, it ought to afford an increasing number of employment and consulting opportunities for sociological practitioners. And these sociologists, it is hoped, will in turn add some of their own special definitional nuances to this evolving field.

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