

Building Alliances Across Differences

Center for Gender in Organizations

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Balancing Interests and Forging Common Platforms: Illustrations from Alliance-Building Within and Between Groups

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Presenters:

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Michael Piore began the seminar by discussing work from his book *Beyond Individualism: How Social Demands of the New Identity Groups Challenge American Political and Economic Life* (Harvard University Press, 1995). He explored the difficulty of reconciling the importance of group action and behavior in our current work on organizations, given the context of the emphasis on individualism in society. He discussed the notion of identity/affinity groups in organizations as “language communities” and as “communities of action” in order to explore ways to think about how groups in organizations can cross borderlands and build alliances across difference. He illustrated his ideas by discussing two research projects in which he is currently engaged.

Karen Proudford discussed her work on the interplay of inter- and intra-group dynamics, broadening the traditional view of inter-group relationships. In her work, she suggests that the literature magnifies conflict *between* groups while minimizing conflict *within* groups, such that we largely overlook the way in which *intra-group* dynamics can ultimately impact *inter-group* dynamics. To that end, she shared with us her work on two projects in which she is involved, in order to develop theory about how dynamics among blacks and among whites affect relationships between blacks and whites.

The Problem of Groups in an Individualistic Society by Michael Piore

Because economics as a field is constructed around the individual and we live in an individualistic culture, it is difficult to understand and explore the role of groups in work organizations. Michael Piore explained how, when middle-class Americans experience conflict between feelings about the importance of individualism and the importance of groups, these feelings are rooted in a particular social context that emphasizes individualism. He is interested in this as a problem of economics—that is, exploring the emphasis in economics on individual initiative on the one hand, and on the other, the sense that groups/teams are important in the operations of organizations. He argues that new forms of operations in the current economy involve and depend upon collective groups for success. Therefore, in his research, he is interested in how this conflict between individual and collective modes is played out in work organizations.

Two Key Concepts for Undertaking a Research Agenda to Explore Individualism and Groups in Organizations

1. Notion of community as linguistic group

Language is a basic human trait; even isolated individuals have language. Thus, it is difficult to argue that language is an “artificial aspect” of organizational activity. Because it is a basic trait, language is a part of people’s identities, and is therefore closely associated with the notion of identity.

Analogous to exploring the role of identity in the economy, then, one would ask: what happens in the borderlands, or when different language communities meet?

Language develops through use and depends on the process of people continuing to talk to one another. One could think of product development as a process of creating a new language, where two separate language communities become a single language community. Integral to the development of a new language community is the *notion of ambiguity or language as an open system*. There is a lot of ambiguity involved in creating a new language, as we are always working out the meaning. What is important is to be able to *specify and work through misunderstandings*. Piore argues that there is often confusion between trust/faith and tolerance for ambiguity. Trust is not necessarily imperative; rather, the ability to isolate the ambiguity is what is key. It is when it becomes possible to isolate and specify ambiguity that it becomes possible to cross over borders and create a new language.

2. *Notion of “Communities of Action”*

In *The Human Condition*, Hannah Arendt develops a typology of the social relations between work and individuals in society in ancient Greece. One of the pieces of this typology is the “community of citizens,” a term she uses to describe public life in ancient Greece. She explains that it is not individual events or actions that give a person’s life meaning. Rather, it is the sum of a person’s actions within the context of communities that gives meaning to any person’s life. In communities of actions, individuals look for a place to tell the stories of their lives, so that others will be able to retell the stories and give individuals immortality.

In these communities, individuals are so like one another that it is possible to appreciate differences. The point here is that *individuality is only possible within a community* of people like you, because they are the ones who will appreciate your individuality and tell your story. In some ways this is similar to a language community, in that everybody shares the same language, though each thing one says is different; if individuals in the group are enough like you, they will understand what you are saying and appreciate the different ways that you are able to use language. The problem with these communities is that if one needs so much similarity to appreciate difference, it becomes difficult to cross borders with other communities. That is, the community is, in some ways, closed. The question becomes, then, how far can we go to cross over these borders and still appreciate difference?

Research Projects

Piore explained two research projects in which he is currently involved:

1. *Organization of product development*

For example, cellular phones are products of telephone and radio technology, two professions that have very different cultures. Technologists in the telephone industry work with a product where consumers expect reliability—when they pick up the phone, they expect to hear a dial tone, when the phone rings they expect someone to be on the other line. By contrast, radio technologists operate in a “cowboy culture” where radio signals fade in and out, and consumers accept this. Piore is interested in how professionals from very different cultures cross borders and make alliances in order to make new products. The point here is to look at

business professional organizations as communities where it is possible to understand what is involved in “border crossings” in order to integrate two distinct communities.

2. *Shift in organizations of economy/research on professions*

The second project looks at the transfer of career orientation amongst professionals toward careers that span organizations rather than careers that are focused on one organization. In the project, researchers ask how the new labor market is developing. They have noted an emergence of new work identities, where there is a shift from organizational to professional identity. With this comes new “affinity groups” or “employee” groups. Piore wants to know what these new affinity groups are doing in work organizations. He gave two examples:

- Gay and lesbian business students

Out gays and lesbians are increasingly involved in the labor market, so much so that they are now being specifically marketed to, and major consulting companies and New York banks are actively recruiting them.

Piore has talked to students at a business school who are involved in a gay and lesbian affinity group. He’s found that these students name networking as the major reason they join the groups. Yet he also found that the comfort of being in a group with others like themselves was another reason the students cited for joining.

Because there is now a series of institutional templates created by the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC), the problem of discrimination can be addressed through a specific system and a designed series of responses. Because there is now a way in which, through these institutional systems, minority groups have been legitimized, they are likely to play an increasing role in work organizations. Even when groups and individuals file complaints without direct results, Piore’s experience indicates that the movement for parity is strengthened nonetheless. For instance, there was a complaint made concerning parity for gays and lesbians in an organization that had no official gay and lesbian affinity group. While the complaint was not immediately addressed, a gay organization that was forming was strengthened as a result of the process. Further, the gay and lesbian student group that raised the issue to the organization was also strengthened through the process.

- Association of Indian Entrepreneurs

Piore discussed the role of senior people in the formation of an organization of Indian entrepreneurs, and their interest in organizing junior members. This organization could be compared to Hannah Arendt's "communities of action" in that the senior individuals have stories they want to tell and want to be passed down to others. Telling the stories and having them embraced is part of what makes their life meaningful. Since individuals are more likely to change jobs rather than stay in one organization, it is no longer the organization that will pass down their stories. While the senior members stress feeling assimilated into American culture, they are particularly interested in telling this to an Indian audience, where, because of their sameness (ethnicity), difference can be tolerated and appreciated.

Piore concluded by explaining that his preliminary research shows how we have institutionalized and legitimized the role that affinity groups play in work organizations, and it is likely they will continue to play this role. While individuals may live in an integrated society, they are important actors in encouraging the development of ethnic affinity groups, which will become increasingly significant in the operation of the economy.

Tracking Difference by Karen Proudford

Proudford described her research as being at the intersection of diversity and group behavior. She is interested in looking *among* groups that seem fairly homogeneous and where conflict appears static. She argues that differences both between and among groups are important to diagnosing conflict and resolution. Thus, in her work, Proudford explores what could be alternative causes for tensions across race.

Dominant Frame for Looking at Tensions Across Race—Inter-Group

Conceptual emphasis is on:

- Differences and tensions lie between groups (inter).
- Groups are homogeneous.
- Conflict is viewed as static.
- Explanations for conflict are:

- Negative explanation—animosity.
- Positive explanation for when relationships work—guilt.

Alternative Frame

- Conflict is the result of inter-group *and* intra-group tension.
- Heterogeneity throughout sets of relationships.
- Conflict is viewed as dynamic.

Intra-Group Influences on Inter-Group Conflict

- Tensions *within* groups.
- Groups viewed as heterogeneous.
- Movement of conflict from *intra* to *inter*.
- Explanations
 - Negative—deteriorating connections between members in one group (intra).
 - Positive—individuals in both groups are committed to working across differences.

Operating Assumption: Individuals are concerned about membership in their own group.

Example of Intra-Group Influences on Inter-Group Conflict

Proudford did research on a police station, where her team asked management if there were any particular problems of which the researchers should be aware. The management said that they had a hard time getting women to come to work because they were always taking time off for family responsibilities.

The researchers found that when men took time off for family purposes, other men covered for them (the *intra-group* dynamic). The women (a minority on the force) did not have such a system. Therefore, when women took time off to take care of family responsibilities, they were viewed as less committed than men; and the problem of taking time off for other responsibilities became seen as a “woman problem.” In this case, it was the *intra-group* dynamic among men—protecting each other—that caused *inter-group* tension between men and women.

Proudford shared two separate cases from her work to illustrate the importance of using an alternative frame to examine tension and conflict across race.

Case One: Black and White Women

As Proudford explains in her article on this topic:

The Black Women's Alliance and Executive Women's Group (all white women) were resource groups in the Bank that represented the interests of their organizational constituencies. Members of the groups knew each other from daily work assignments and from recent appointments to the same committees dealing with culture change. What began as a cordial professional relationship between the two groups escalated into one filled with mistrust, tension, and suspicion (Proudford, 1998: 626).

She explained that there were attempts at coalition building between the two groups. The Executive Women's Group's intra-group dynamics involved:

- Generational dynamics—that is the younger women disagreed with the confrontational approach of the older women since they felt that gender had less of an impact on their working lives. The younger were, therefore, less concerned about alliance-building with the Black Women's Alliance around issues.
- Distraction from race—The older women defined the issues at the Bank as primarily about gender and were unwilling to look at power imbalances related to race.

The Black Woman's Alliance intra-group dynamics involved:

- Status differences—there were status differences among the members of the Black Women's Alliance that were essentially ignored. Rather, the group focused on race and defined all members of the organization as equally powerless.
- Marginalization of the “uncommitted”—some black women in the Bank were not considered to be sufficiently committed to the cause of the Black Women's Alliance, and there were debates among the group as to whether or not these women should be able to join.

Finally, positive individual relationships between white and black women were not taken into consideration. Here is a case where intra-group dynamics clearly affected the inter-group relationship.

Case Two: Racial Diversity at the Management Level

The second case Proudford discussed was a non-profit organization that had an all-white management team and an increasingly black client base. Their challenge was to increase diversity at the management level. The director of the organization hired a black woman as operations manager.

First Black Manager

- Black female hired as operations manager
- Dynamics included resistance by staff to take her position seriously
 - Scapegoated as incompetent
 - The problems in the organization were chalked up to “bad hiring decision”
 - The black manager left in less than one year
- Intra-group dynamics Among whites in the organization were as follows:
 - Committed white manager—really invested in the diversity initiative
 - Resistance from white peers
 - Suspicion of the white manager’s motives
 - Intransigence
 - White peer acceptance of and allegiance to white managers
 - Little support to the committed white manager from agency head

The white director then hired another black woman, this time in a higher managerial position.

Second Black Manager

- Black woman hired as manager (one position up from operations manager)
- Dynamics included:
 - Hostility from white peers
 - Resistance
 - Crisis—the organization was deemed as operating in a crisis situation
 - Threats—managers were threatening to leave the organization
- Intra-group dynamics for black manager:

- She allied herself with one Latina and one lesbian who worked in the organization
 - She was filled with the history of the organization as an unjust organization by the two individuals to whom she was allied
- Intra-group dynamics for white manager:
- Relationships with peers strained
 - She was filled with stories from peers about the current crises of the institution
 - Caught between an old and a new organization

Here, too, is another example of the ways in which looking at both intra- and inter-group dynamics makes it more possible to understand the complexity of building alliances across identity groups.

Conclusion

Michael Piore emphasized the ways in which it is different when a group (or a “community of action”) is convening to talk to one another than when they are confronting other groups. It is easier to talk about differences within an affinity group than it is when the group is confronting another group (an affinity group of equal status or a group that is in a position of power over the group). This point is similar to William Gamson’s point about “lowest-common-denominator” politics, or the idea that it is difficult to hold onto multiple identity categories within a group, for fear that by doing so, the group’s position will be weakened.

Related to this, Karen Proudford pointed out that when a group is in a “one-down” power position, they tend to emphasize commonalities (or “lowest-common-denominator”), whereas a group in a “one-up” power position has an easier time exploring differences, since they have nothing to lose.

Both Piore’s and Proudford’s presentations helped us to think more broadly about the challenges of building alliances across identity groups, and proposed new strategies for working through these challenges.

Readings

Piore, M. 1995. *Beyond Individualism: How Social Demands of the New Identity Groups Challenge American Political and Economic Life*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, pp. 1-8, 140-195.

Proudford, K. 1998. Notes on the Intra-Group Origins of Inter-Group Conflict in Organizations: Black-White Relations as an Exemplar. *University of Pennsylvania Journal of Labor and Employment Law*, vol. 1, no. 2, pp. 615-637.

The Center for Gender in Organizations (CGO) is an international resource for innovative ideas and practice in the field of gender, work, and organizations. Recognizing the pervasive role of work organizations in society and our individual lives, CGO seeks to advance learning and support organizations to strengthen both gender equity and organizational effectiveness. In our approach, we understand that gender works simultaneously with race, class, ethnicity, age and sexual identity in shaping organizational systems, cultures, and practices as well as individuals' identities and experiences at work. We work at the intersection of research and practice and we pursue our mission through action learning, consultation, research, education, convening, and information dissemination.

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