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**Citation:** Atewologun, D. & Sealy, R. (2011). Advancing racio-ethnic and diversity theorising through intersectional identity work. *Academy of Management Proceedings*, 2011(1), doi: 10.5465/AMBPP.2011.65870621

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# **ADVANCING RACIO-ETHNIC AND DIVERSITY THEORISING THROUGH 'INTERSECTIONAL IDENTITY WORK'**

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## **ABSTRACT**

Management research on racio-ethnicity inadequately addresses the complexities of multiple identity dimensions and underplays the role of context. Integrating identity construction with intersectionality, we focus on how individuals make sense of the dynamic nature of non-essentialist identities. We offer an 'intersectional identity work' framework to advance racio-ethnic scholarship in organisations.

## **A THEMATIC OVERVIEW OF RACIO-ETHNIC RESEARCH**

We use the term 'racio-ethnicity' in reference to membership of biologically and/or culturally distinct groups reflective of differences in privilege in society that affects performance, satisfaction or progress in organisations (Cox, 1990). To gain a thematic overview of the literature, we drew on racio-ethnicity reviews published in *Management and Organization Studies* (MOS) from 1990, a 'watershed year' in which diversity research began proliferating management scholarship (Özbilgin, Beauregard, Tatli & Bell, 2011). The review publications on which we concentrated are Nkomo (1992), Cox, Nkomo & Welch (2001), Roberson & Block (2001), and Kenny & Briner (2007). In our analysis of these papers, four themes emerged regarding the state of ethnicity research in MOS. Research has tended to focus on i) elucidating differences in organisational outcomes between racio-ethnic groups; ii) examining the nature of stereotype and bias; and iii) investigating minority ethnic individuals' reactions to this; iv) with differential regard paid to context. While this body of work continues to develop, a key criticism from reviewers is the essentialist assumptions underlying racio-ethnicity and insufficient consideration of context in examining racio-ethnicity in organisations. This criticism is well articulated by critical diversity scholars (e.g. Zanoni, Janssens, Benschop & Nkomo, 2010) who challenge the positivistic ontological assumption much racio-ethnic/diversity research makes about dimensions of difference being stable, fixed variables. A primary means by which organisational scholars have sought to address these criticisms is by adopting an intersectional perspective on racio-ethnicity.

## **Intersectionality and racio-ethnic research**

Intersectionality theorising emerged from critical feminist roots in an effort to exhume the experiences of women traditionally silenced in gender and race studies due to their position at the nexus of subordinate gender and racio-ethnic status. Intersectionality is “the mutual reproduction of class, gender and racial relations of inequality” (Acker, 2006: 443) and sensitises us to “the relationships among multiple dimensions and modalities of social relations and subject formations” (McCall, 2005: 1771). We refer to intersectionality as both perspective and framework.

A recent review (Atewologun, 2008) highlighted three main strands of organisational research on racio-ethnicity and gender. One strand presents intersecting identities as a single analytical unit, and another as a focus for subjective experience. However, we believe the third means by which scholars examine combined racio-ethnic and gender status - as a framework - offers greatest potential for advancing racio-ethnic studies. In this strand of research, the intersection of gender (and other identity facets) with ethnicity is proactively deployed by scholars to make sense of the processes in which respondents (and researchers) engage with (women’s) work experiences. For example, Henry (1995) draws on developmental experiences on the interplay of race, class and sex to make sense of how a teacher develops her social cultural practice as a teacher; Hite (2007) uses gender intersecting with culture to make sense of the career decisions and experiences of three generations of Latina women; and narratives of a multicultural group of hotel staff are analysed to illustrate how identities are fused, with gender, ethnicity, nationality and class presented as fluid aspects of simultaneously shifting selves (Adib & Guerrier, 2003). Individually, these studies illustrate how culture, class and gender influence the meaning of, and experiences relating to racio-ethnicity at work. However, there are limitations to their ability to make a collective impact within MOS. Intersectional studies remain at the margins of organisational scholarship and somewhat fragmented, with contributions from assorted disciplines (e.g. medicine, communications, sociology) often published in specialist ‘women’s issues’ journals or critical management publications (Atewologun, 2008). Compounding this, explicit methodological guidelines for analysing intersectionality are elusive (Nash, 2008), limiting the potential of the framework for reproducibility and theory-building. In combination, these factors limit the actual and perceived value of intersectionality research to mainstream management literature.

## **Advancing intersectionality research**

We propose that an intersectional perspective can be applied more broadly to management scholarship, beyond empirical contributions to understanding the experiences of members of minority racio-ethnic and gender groups. Intersectionality has particular relevance for organisational studies of racio-ethnicity. The organisation presents an additional layer of interpretation and meaning for socially-salient identity facets because within its socio-structural hierarchy, any given individual is unlikely to be disadvantaged across all pertinent identity dimensions. Take, for example, the case of a black homosexual Finance Director, whose intersecting gender, race, professional and sexual identities place him in privileged as well as disadvantaged positions within the typical Western organisational context. We propose applying an intersectionality perspective to organisation diversity studies by examining simultaneous axes

of disadvantage and privilege. We believe this is an opportunity to advance racio-ethnicity scholarship in a manner that also more closely reflects experiences relating to racio-ethnicity in today's organisations.

In summary, we acknowledge the contribution of intersectionality to highlighting the complexity and subtleties of non-essentialist identity dimensions in MOS. We seek to extend this contribution by recognising the significance of the organisational, and broader context in constructing racio-ethnicity, thus expanding its scope to simultaneous privileged and disadvantaged experiences. We believe that an intersectional lens can go beyond narratives to offer in-depth insight into the on-going meaning-making and self-construal experiences of multiply-identified individuals. To elaborate on how this may be achieved, we draw on another established domain in organisation studies. We draw from the literature on identification and identity work in organisations and adapt it as a lens through which theorising on intersectionality and racio-ethnicity may be advanced.

### **IDENTITY WORK**

Identity is, simply, an individual's answer to the question "who (or what) am I?" Identity helps us understand how the demands of contemporary organisational life affect individuals' and collectives' self-conceptions and self-representations. Within the vast literature on identity in MOS (for reviews, see Ashforth, Harrison & Corley, 2008; Van Dick, 2001) we limit our consideration to perspectives on the process of *becoming* (as opposed to being), represented by identification. Drawing on Whitbourne, Sneed & Skultety (2002) and Jenkins (2004), we define identification as *an ongoing internal process, wherein personal meaning and significance are achieved as one locates one's place in a given social context*. Sveningsson and Alvesson (2003: 1164) espouse a need for investigating how people 'become identified' which emphasises "dynamic aspects and on-going struggles around creating a sense of self and providing temporary answers to the question 'who am I?'" This process perspective on identity is influenced by a postmodern agenda and seeks to investigate the subtleties and complexities of the dynamics of identification, fundamental to understanding human relations within contemporary organisations (Brown, 2001).

The mindful aspect of identification is conceptualized as 'identity work', "the ongoing mental activity that an individual undertakes in constructing an understanding of the self that is coherent, distinct and positively valued" (Alvesson et al, 2008: 15). Identity work theory (e.g. Ashforth et al, 2008; Pratt, 2000) describes the processes in which individuals engage, in their motivation to reduce perceived incongruence (or 'identity gaps') between self and socio-structural context. Identity-heightening episodes (positive and negative) often evoke powerful responses and are fertile ground for in-depth investigations into identity work, as at these moments we have a heightened awareness of how we are constructing ourselves (Sveningsson & Alvesson, 2003). Such episodes (encounters, transitions or surprises) trigger sensemaking and identity enactment as individuals frame their experiences 'to comprehend, understand, and explain (these) in such a way as to give meaning, purpose, and direction to action' (Roberts, Dutton, Spreitzer, Heaphy & Quinn, 2005: 716).

### **INTERSECTIONAL IDENTITY WORK**

We position identification as one's ongoing search for personal meaning and significance in the context of societal structure and power relations. Thus, individual identity is constructed as (social) contexts trigger ongoing self-evaluation and resolution of identity gaps - compared against other individuals and groups. We propose there is potential in placing an intersectional lens over identity work processes by focusing on how (minority) individuals construct an understanding of multiply-identified selves in response to identity-heightening (contradictory, ambiguous or affirmative) experiences as organisational members. We call on researchers to advance racio-ethnic scholarship by adopting a dynamic perspective of how minority organisational members negotiate self-meaning through the ongoing social construction of intersecting identities. To achieve this, we propose a framework of 'intersectional identity work', which (drawing on Alvesson et al, 2008), we define as *the on-going activity that individuals undertake in constructing an understanding of a mutually constituted self that is coherent, distinct and positively valued*.

In drawing on identity work and intersectionality, we integrate two domains with low conceptual distance (Okhuysen & Bonardi, 2011) as both are concerned with enhancing our understanding of self-construction. We position our concept of intersectional identity work at the critical edge of Alvesson et al's (2008) interpretivist framework of orientations to identification in the identity work literature. We acknowledge the context in which self-construction occurs and the role that social and power relations play in this process and in the manifestation of inequalities at work. As such, we are influenced by Calas & Smircich's (1999) post-structural feminist theoretical perspective; our focus however remains at the level of individual identity construction. Our perspective draws attention to a critical and constructivist approach, offering an agent-centred view of individuals' reactions to their social positioning.

### **Outlining a research agenda for intersectional identity work**

Thus far, we have advocated a more prominent role for racio-ethnicity research in MOS, focusing on how minority individuals dynamically construct and enact intersecting identity facets that confer advantage and disadvantage. As an initial project, we propose investigating how those organisational members whose location in given organisational spaces may be constructed as 'different' or 'Other', engage in intersectional identity work. Many minority ethnic men and women in high-status (e.g. leadership or professional) positions are in such organisational locations. These individuals are hypothesised to engage in sensemaking processes to reconcile oppositional identities in contexts in which the higher value accorded their organisational status is juxtaposed against devalued ethnic (and gender, for women) identities (Ibarra & Petriglieri, 2007; Kenny & Briner, 2007).

Drawing on identity work models, this juxtaposition of organisational privilege against socio-structural disadvantage is likely to position such individuals in encounters that heighten awareness of their intersecting oppositional identities, inducing identity work. They are thus likely to respond to or anticipate contextual cues regarding these oppositional identities and construct self-narratives to reconcile any gaps or reconfirm their distinctiveness in such contexts (Roberts, 2005). For example a senior black British man may adopt the masculine posturing of competitiveness and rivalry to counter potential devaluing of his ethnic status by majority colleagues. However, British Asian women (often stereotyped as 'meek') and black British women (often stereotyped as 'aggressive') are likely to adopt alternative and differing

approaches to self-construction in the face of similar identity challenges. Intersectional identity work can also offer insight into how senior minority ethnic men and women construct their identities in contexts in which they are positioned or differentiated as role models (heightening their minority status) or generic, non-differentiated leaders (heightening their organisational status).

Thus, we encourage research into minority individuals' meaning-making or identity work in the context of simultaneous privilege and disadvantage. An intersectional identity work lens will facilitate examinations of when, how and why minority ethnic men and women process identity-heightening encounters. Possible topics for investigation are: What are the contexts or encounters in which multiple identities take on different meanings for senior minority ethnic women and men? How do they interpret or make sense of episodes that raise the salience of their intersecting, oppositional identities? What identity work tactics or strategies do they engage when they experience contradictory, ambiguous or affirmative identity triggers? How do senior minority ethnic women and men construct or draw on various identity facets (independently or simultaneously) during this process? Such identity work could be examined by individuals keeping journals of identity-heightening episodes and participating in follow on in-depth interviews to help elucidate the sense-making in response to the episodes.

### **Potential limitations**

It is important to highlight some limitations of the approach offered here. It could be argued that intersectional identity work necessitates fragmentation of individuals' multi-dimensional identities and privileges some identity dimensions over others (in this case, we have focused on racio-ethnicity and gender in a senior context). In response, we join similarly pragmatic scholars (Cole, 2009; Özbilgin et al, 2011; Purdie-Vaughns & Eibach, 2008) and encourage researchers to critically and reflectively select-in those pertinent identity dimensions that are most salient, given a study's social and organisational context, while remaining cognisant of what has been selected out. Additionally, our attention to episodes of agent-centred identity construction may be perceived as overly-focused on the micro-level, diminishing the impact of social, economic and cultural context in defining racio-ethnic experience. However, we suggest that the intersectional identity framework, embedded within the identity construct, facilitates examination at multiple analytical levels – individual, group, and organisational as well as political, cultural and social (Alvesson et al., 2008; Loseke, 2007). We also believe that identity work allows us to maintain a uniquely psychological perspective on experiences relating to Otherness, while remaining cognisant and appreciative of the socially constructed nature of difference, within an organizational context. Finally, although we believe that intersectional identity work opens up the field for innovative research methods, approaches such as journals and observations often constitute resource- and time-intensive methods, which may also be considered intrusive by participants and organisations. We urge the use of these highly valid and rich data sources for initial theory development. However, we acknowledge that less demanding methods such as interviews also have potential for examining identity work (Alvesson et al, 2008).

## **CONCLUSION**

We conclude by reflecting on the potential contributions of conducting ethnicity research from an intersectional identity work perspective. Intersectional identity work provides an empirical contribution that goes beyond rich narrative descriptions of the experiences of minority ethnic organisational members. It would explicate the identity construction processes underlying the meaning-making of oppositional identities. Intersectional identity work also expands the scope and relevance of racio-ethnic research and practice, moving it away from the margins of MOS. The prevalence and relevance of international scholarship draw attention to the limits of racio-ethnicity research's original focus on North American women of colour. Here we have focused on racio-ethnicity but believe this approach opens up empirical space for examining multiple diversity dimensions such as class, sexual orientation, religion and disability. This potentially extends scholarship to the experiences of women (and men) around the world for whom racio-ethnicity does not necessarily constitute disadvantage. We believe that an intersectional identity work lens will extend this traditionally relatively narrow and homogenous scope, while remaining sensitive to the 'politics of place and location' relevant for understanding and theorising around diversity (Metcalf & Woodhams, 2008). Additionally, intersectional identity work can be applied to studies of 'whiteness', challenging the assumption in traditional racio-ethnic literature that white individuals do not 'have' ethnicity. This could be achieved by exploring whiteness intersecting with class or sexual orientation, for instance. Intersectional identity work also deepens our understanding of power by acknowledging the genuinely diffuse nature of power and privilege, such that even members of historically-disadvantaged groups can wield power in certain spaces (such as when constructed as 'black role models' or in their structural positions as organisational leaders). There is also the potential to contribute to identity construction literature. Explicating the processes involved in constructing oppositional identities will align with other work on identity construction of 'dirty' or marginalised workers (e.g. Ashforth & Kreiner, 1999; Creed, Dejordy & Lok, 2010). We also envisage practical implications of an intersectional identity work approach. For example, understanding why/how/when minority ethnic women construct their intersecting identities may offer insight into the benefits (or futility) of having them select from 'gender' or 'race' network silos prevalent in many progressive, diversity-conscious organisations.

Overall, we believe that an intersectional identity work framework offers much potential in way of advancing scholarship on racio-ethnicity in organisations. We present the framework of intersectional identity work as an ongoing project and offer it as a stimulus for conversation with fellow scholars.

## **REFERENCES AVAILABLE FROM THE AUTHORS**