

THE PSYCHOLOGY AND MANAGEMENT OF WORKPLACE DIVERSITY



EDITED BY
MARGARET S. STOCKDALE
AND FAYE J. CROSBY

The myth of meritocracy

The myth of meritocracy posits that anyone can succeed if they work hard enough. In other words, stations in life are perceived to be simply a function of the amount of effort we invest in our jobs. The underlying assumption is that the only requirement for success is effort. Thus, failure is due to a lack of ability or effort. This myth is often used as a bludgeon against minorities and women because their lower positions in organizations are assumed to be logical extensions of their abilities and/or effort. This myth does not recognize the impact of histories of exploitation and exclusion that operate within and outside of organizations.

The myth of meritocracy is dependent upon a societal culture that values individualism (Tatun, 1999) and protects dominant groups' privilege (McIntosh,

1993). By embracing individualism, those who embrace the myth of meritocracy are able to see themselves as credible, deserving, and worthy. It also allows them the belief that achieving their goals in life is solely dependent upon their innate ability and hard work. Those who adopt the meritocracy myth deny the existence of systems of oppression and privilege that stifle or provide opportunities based upon color, gender, and/or sexuality. McIntosh (1993) eloquently defines privilege as an invisible knapsack of provisions that is taken for granted and is supposed to remain unseen. To acknowledge the benefits that dominant group membership – and thus privilege – offers to one's well-being, job opportunities, and career mobility, would threaten these individuals' sense of self and self-worth.

Myth of the colorblind ideal

According to the myth of the colorblind ideal, individual differences such as race should be ignored because they are irrelevant, implying that the color of someone's skin is meaningless and that the treatment of people of color in history can be ignored (Cox and Nkomo, 1990). The problem with this is that one cannot separate a person's race from his or her identity, because it is impossible *not* to notice race or color. Moreover, the colorblind approach does not recognize the authentic differences that are the defining features of identity (Fowers and Richardson, 1996), nor does it recognize power differentials that can hamper minority achievement. As a result, while the colorblind premise is a positive one, the reality of ignoring individual identity, culture, and minority status often has very negative consequences for minority groups. The underlying hypocrisy of the colorblind perspective is that its perpetuation tends to encourage subtle and even overt forms of discrimination against minority groups (see Shofeld, 1986). When individuals are not allowed to recognize and appreciate differences between themselves and others, there is instead a reliance upon ethnocentric standards and on stereotypes for explanations of differences that inevitably perpetuates rather than ends discriminatory behaviors. The result is increased tension and segregation and the positioning of race as taboo (Shofeld, 1986). The colorblind approach resists diversity and makes the mention or discussion of race taboo, thus silencing it. It also provides a shelter for aversive racists. When race doesn't matter, individuals are allowed to engage in racism without fear of being identified or suffering repercussions. The colorblind perspective privileges dominant groups by reinforcing the message that "we're all the same and that differences don't matter." Shofeld (1986: 250) concludes:

The colorblind perspective is not without some subtle dangers. It may ease initial tensions and minimize the frequency of overt conflict. Nonetheless, it can also foster phenomena like the taboo against ever mentioning race or connected issues and the refusal to recognize and deal with the existence of intergroup tensions. Thus, it fosters an environment in which aversive racists, who are basically well-intentioned,

are prone to act in a discriminatory manner. Further, it makes it unlikely that the opportunities inherent in a pluralistic institution will be fully realized and that the challenges facing such an institution will be dealt with effectively.

In organizations, the adoption of the colorblind perspective leads to a failure to capitalize on diversity. As discussed earlier, by recognizing the existence of diversity and gaining an understanding of the important contributions diverse groups can make to organizations, many aspects of organizational life can be enhanced. The colorblind perspective in contrast silences the mere recognition of differences (the surface-level diversity) and subsequently the valuing and implementation of the benefits that diversity can offer (the deeper-level diversity).

The melting pot myth

Parallel to the colorblind perspective is the metaphor of America as the great melting pot, where individuals from any country, nationality, race, creed, color, religion, or culture can come and live together in harmony. This belief automatically assumes that everyone sheds their original identities equally in favor of the "American" identity; that we are a national identity devoid of race or color. One underlying requirement not often recognized is that minorities are expected to assimilate to the dominant US culture (e.g., White, male), without retaining any vestige of their own cultures. Thus, little attention is given to how this assimilation may affect individuals who are forced to conform to a foreign culture while at the same time experiencing the distortion, marginalization, or omission of their home culture in the classes, textbooks, newscasts, newspapers, and magazines of the culture in which they reside (Hacker, 1995). In addition, the melting pot myth implies that all people have been readily accepted into this American identity, which has not always been the case. Consequently, when individuals are unable to completely assimilate, they are kept distant, excluded, and considered deficient in some manner by the majority culture (the myth of meritocracy, for example), which subsequently leads to the same devaluing and underutilization of resources (i.e., minorities) discussed throughout this chapter.

In discussing the melting pot metaphor and its resulting cycle of exclusion, Wildman (1996: 113) suggests, "In our culture, the image of the melting pot is forceful; it speaks to the powerful positive image that assimilation carries. The message to those outside the mainstream dominant culture is 'Melt in with us, be like us, or fail to do so at your peril'." This narrow-mindedness can lead to dissatisfied and unproductive employees, high turnover, and low overall organizational performance (Thomas and Ely, 1996). "Rather than as a cauldron, many commentators today prefer to see America as a mosaic or even a lumpy stew. At best, the pot still contains plenty of unmelted pieces" (Hacker, 1995: 8). Diversity is inherently more beneficial to our society than the assimilation depicted in the melting pot metaphor, since it includes a recognition and appreciation of the

contributions of all members of society. We must recognize that not all of us have melted together into one identity, nor should we (Wildman, 1996).