When Diversity Makes a Difference

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Abstract

Diversity is an ever moving goal line. Vigilance and constant effort are required to achieve and sustain it, but the benefits are many. These remarks emphasize three points: First, diversity advances the quality of our democracy. Second, it makes for more sustainable decisions. But, third, it is resisted because it changes the status quo.

If ever there was one among us who appreciated the interplay of theory informed by practice, and practice informed by theory, it was Don Stone. He maintained that public service must be for the public good (Herbert 2004). Let us keep our eyes on that prize when thinking about tomorrow’s America and how diversity makes it what it is.

Here we are at a conference with the theme “Governance in the Midst of Diversity.” And here we are in a city like no other. With a population close to 2.5 million, about 60 percent of whom are Hispanic or Latino, about 20 percent are African American and about 20 percent are whites who are not Hispanic or Latino.¹ This is an ethnically rich, dynamic environment, where the population of Miami-Dade increases by 10,000 to 20,000 annually. By way of comparison, the state of Florida’s overall population is 20 percent Hispanic or Latino and the U.S. population is 15 percent Hispanic or Latino.²

Here peoples of vastly different heritages live and work together. Anglos, accustomed to being the majority in other urban areas, are the minority. Perhaps Miami is an analogue for diversity in all its forms across this country. Recent census data show that about 25 percent of the nation’s kindergartners and about 20 percent of all K–12 students are Latino (Yen 2009). This shift in school enrollment is evident in the West, just as it is here.

I am speaking today about how diversity makes a difference, not only in Miami-Dade, but wherever you live. The title for these remarks sounds like a tautology. This is by design. Diversity means differentness. Literally. But beyond that, more questions emerge than resolve.

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In fits and starts, we get a little bit better at overcoming stereotypes and prejudice. In very rough terms, our accommodation to diversity has progressed from the Melting Pot to the Salad Bowl to the Quilt. First, the Melting Pot went something like this: It is okay to be different (Polish, Slavic, Hispanic, African American, gay, female, Catholic, Jewish, Muslim) as long as you act like a white male Protestant with Anglo-Saxon roots. From the late 1800s to about the 1960s, the Melting Pot era gave rise to laws that forbade discriminating against people because of their outward distinctions. The thinking was that the voices of these groups could be spoken as well by the ventriloquist—the majority group—as by themselves.

Then came the Salad Bowl analogy, denoting not just a tolerance for differentness but an appreciation that difference brings with it added perspectives and strengths. This viewpoint drove efforts to improve working relationships and to build systems that capitalize on multiple frames of reference. This era was roughly from the 1960s to the 1990s. During this time confidence in the ventriloquist grew thin, and laws like the Equal Pay Act, the Pregnancy Discrimination Act, and the Americans with Disabilities Act made accommodation for those who were “different.”

Now comes the Quilt, where the focus is on accepting and leveraging differentness while combining the separate pieces into a sustainable fabric. We assume that enhanced performance in agencies and improved quality of life in communities will result. In truth, our efforts have moved to a focus on embracing some dimensions of diversity while tolerating others. Now, instead of the ventriloquist, we puzzle over how to make sense of all these voices. It is a messy time, filled with cobwebs rather than straight lines that connect everyone. The more we accommodate diversity, the less formulaic become our relations (Gilligan 1982).

A scan of the literature on all types of differentness—race, gender, age, ethnicity, religion, sexuality, physical ability—reveals an interesting trend. There was an explosion of writing about diversity in the management literature in the 1990s. At the start of the decade, articles tended to frame the issue as one of many challenges; by the end of the decade, they expressed less fear and more hope, delineating strategies for how to capitalize on it and how to conceptualize it in a constructive fashion.

**The Irony of Talking About Inclusion While Practicing Exclusion**

There is irony when talking about inclusiveness. Implementing the mechanisms to ensure inclusion remains controversial. Talking about *inclusion* is within our comfort zone, but practicing *exclusion* remains a habit. Is Attorney General Eric Holder correct—that when it comes to talking about race, we are a nation of cowards? If our scholarship is any indication, the answer is more yes than no (Alexander 1997; Oldfield, Candler, and Johnson 2006; Stivers 2007a, 2007b).

For example, to paraphrase Domonic Bearfield (2008), it is possible that Barack Obama’s presidency will shake us loose from the polar characterizations that mark how society depicts African Americans. There are two images, Bearfield argues: the Magic Negro and the closed fist. Think of the roles that Morgan Freeman and Queen Latifah play in movies. These are of the Magic Negro ilk, where the black character provides moral or spiritual guidance by using folk insight to assist a
white character. Then think of images from the Black Power movement to capture the separatist meaning of the closed fist. This is to say that how we think about the other shapes our comfort level and myths about how we get along.

In the last forty years, the volume of articles appearing in public administration journals on diversity-related matters has waxed and waned. Figure 1 shows that research on matters related to diversity mushroomed between the 1970s and the 1990s. Prior to 1970 there was a simplistic approach to the subject: Only papers on gender, race, and representative bureaucracy appeared.

As of the 1970s, many more facets drew sufficient interest that our colleagues wrote about them. Gender continued to skyrocket, while representativeness increased only somewhat, giving way to the additional topics that diversity opened up: affirmative action, age, ethnicity, minority status, and physical ability. After the high-water mark of the 1990s, interest waned for most of these subjects. In terms of physical ability, writings are concentrated in the decade since the Americans with Disabilities Act was enacted in 1990 and have since trailed off. Now only gender, religion, sexuality, representative bureaucracy, and ethnicity are on the increase.

Writings on sexuality are on the increase as more articles appear on the subject of same-sex marriage, workplace benefits, and issues surrounding transgender nondiscrimination policy. This stream is recent, with contributions showing up only since 1990.

Articles on ethnicity and minority status concentrate on the question of who benefits. Those on race ask how racial distinctions result in different types of policies. The response to New Orleans and the Gulf Coast after Hurricane Katrina is the most recent case in point (Stivers 2007b).

Along with sexuality, religion has become more popular in recent years. Journals are replete with papers on spirituality (Bruce 2000), explication of the religious undertones of our founding documents (Stillman 2004), and investigations of its implications. Here is an interesting fact: David Houston and his colleagues (2008) found that people in public service occupations generally are more religious and possess less secular attitudes than those in non–public service occupations.

At the same time, interest in questions of representative bureaucracy escalated in the 1980s and continues to be on the increase. Initially focused on race in the 1960s, the subject broadened to encompass age, religion, affirmative action, gender, sexuality, ethnicity, passive versus active representation, and the role of organizational culture in affecting the degree to which decision-makers actively represent the group(s) of which they are a member (Wilkins and Williams 2008).

All this is to say that the focus of attention shifts based on which wheel is squeaking. Our attention does not stay riveted to an issue that is too distant from that which affects us personally. (So much for the “objective” in social science.) Talking about “otherness” grows old when it is a distant issue. Not until “others” are among us do we really deal with it in meaningful terms.

The studies on gender have continued to rise because its effect in the workplace, and especially in the research factories—the universities—is real. The majority of college students—and MPA students—are now women, and the number of women in the professoriate is increasing. Yet many of the systems in the workplace were...
built for people who do not get pregnant, who have no need for nursing rooms at the office, no need for maternity leave or early afternoon hours in order to pick children up from school, and no need for primary elder-care and child-care responsibilities.

Diversity makes a difference when it affects people. Perhaps the drop-off in many of the other categories means that the questions these issues raise have been resolved. Or perhaps it means that acceptance is high enough that writing about it is “much ado about nothing.” Or maybe it reflects backlash and a desire to close the door to the subject, regardless of its salience. Who is to know?

Here are three points to emphasize. The first is that diversity advances the quality of our democracy. The second is that diversity makes for more sustainable decisions. And the third is that diversity does make a difference—that is why it is resisted. It changes things. I will elaborate on each of these points.

First, diversity advances the quality of our democracy. It also complicates our work, at least in the short run. The cumulative result of immigration, culture change, and an appreciation for the other is diversity. It brings social, economic, and political engagement by women as well as men, by persons of all races, ethnicities, languages, religions, and sexualities. The more we value diversity, the more we must ensure that our processes and procedures are open to all—that voices usually silent are heard; that we stand ready not just to tolerate difference but to embrace it. And all this requires altering one tradition in order to be responsive to multiple traditions.

American democracy is made stronger when all voices and hands participate in the institutions that govern our lives. How could it be any other way? Does one group know better about another’s interest than they themselves do? (Remember: We have already rejected the ventriloquist.)

Gone are the days of the founding fathers, all of whom were white males of European descent, landowners of influence. Gone are the days when the minority was willing to sit in silence as the majority established the rules and institutions that would perpetuate its power and advantage.

Just consider last November’s election. Instead of four white men vying for presi-
dent and vice president, there were only two. The fact that one of the other candidates was black and one was a woman made the race more interesting, more representative, more of tomorrow’s kind of slate, rather than yesterday’s. Bobby Jindal’s election (and popularity) as governor of Louisiana and Barack Obama’s election (and popularity) as president suggest that, right now, race is the lesser of diversity concerns.

More cynical observers will note that the “other” gets access to leadership posts after the dominant group makes such a mess of things that the public concludes that “anybody can do better.” For whatever reason, the tipping point, hopefully, has finally been reached. The transition from passive representation to active representation is in motion. And the ventriloquist is out the door, once and for all.

Let us revisit the early 1900s. The Oscars are won by the most visible on stage, but I want to talk about the supporting actresses for this nation. The founding narratives for public administration have documented the participation of women from settlement houses and the Bureau of Municipal Research. But the contributions of a much larger group, American club women, remains largely unrecognized despite the fact that they participated greatly in the development of governance structures in cities and counties. Although most of them lacked the professional training of the settlement house workers, club women—in other words, community activists—looked around their towns, saw what needed to be done, and helped to create libraries, health clinics, schools, sanitation systems, and decent roads (Scheer 2002). Their voices remind us of the inadequacy of private charity, the value of government in social action, and the importance of person-to-person connections between people in government and people in neighborhoods.

In 1908 the Women’s Municipal League of Boston was formed, and by 1912 it claimed 1,800 members. Its philosophy was that its membership should include women of every race, creed, and occupation, from the poorest, least educated to the wealthiest and best educated. They worked collaboratively with the city to monitor streets, sanitation, housing, and recreation centers. In 1912 Mrs. T. J. Bowlker, the League’s president, wrote an article for the journal American City. In it she said that women had a special function in developing the welfare of humanity—a function which, in her words, men could not perform. This function consisted of women’s power to make, in any place in which they happened to live, a home for all those who came there. She explained that “Women must now learn to make of their cities great community homes for all the people” (1912, 863). She closed her description of the League’s work with these words:

The interests of men are divergent; property interests and the interests of personal success, drive the different classes of men far asunder, but the interests of women are convergent, and bring all classes close together. Modern knowledge teaches that the things for which women care most deeply, the health and the happiness of those they hold dear, are unattainable for any one of us unless they are attained by all. May the women of the country unite to create a true democracy, which shall be, not a mere form of government, but a practical, living force, a vital power, binding us all together. (869)

Bowlker’s work in Boston was simultaneous with Jane Addams’s work in Chicago. A few years later, Mary Parker Follett’s writings on citizenship, and on the centrality of the neighborhood and community, were similar to Bowlker’s theme of women’s role in enhancing the quality of life and of democracy by focusing on
the community. Our own Laverne Burchfield, who completed her doctoral work in 1928, wrote on the subject of international law and how it could contribute to world peace. She had come of age in an era where women were making their mark by focusing on the importance of life in community, democratic values, and using the instruments of government to promote peace.

These women’s voices, although astute, were drowned out by Fordism and behaviorism—two dynamics of more interest to men than to women, specifically empiricism, objectification, and “scientific” management. Why was their message left to lie on library shelves for decades? Because there was no room for their message in the canon. It did not fit. When the canon is all there is, change comes in inconsequential nibbles around the edge of what we already know. Diverse perspectives—and diverse ways of knowing—move us from the Procrustean bed of the usual to an expanded understanding of the possible.

What happens when we establish convenient heuristics in the form of paradigms and boundaries around mainstream “science”? The answer is that they make it easier for us to disregard the voice of the “other,” to discount notions at variance with our own, and to put more stock in the words of the ventriloquist than in the words of the originator.

When the usual is all there is, we never have to take off our blinders to look to the right and the left. It is not even necessary to think very hard. We just walk in the steps of someone who wears the same-size shoes we do. The nation is a house with many rooms; there must be a room for you and for me. To embrace the “other” is to make the house into a home, to depolarize our differences. Thus, to the point: Diversity enhances the quality of our democracy.

The second point is that diversity makes for more sustainable decisions. Policies that are established by us without considering the effect on them are shortsighted. This is what the Griggs v. Duke Power Company decision in 1971 was about—it outlawed hiring procedures that had an adverse impact on traditionally disadvantaged groups. Likewise, from a racial perspective, I spent fifteen years in Birmingham, Alabama—a city with a guilty conscience left over from the tumult of the 1960s. Every policy decision that is made in that city now goes through a crucible, where its effect on African Americans as well as whites is examined, before it is enacted. As frustrating as the debates and delays can be, it is actually easier to hammer out workable solutions there than in cities that turn a blind eye to race relations, denying the reality of the difference that difference makes.

Sustainable decisions built on an appreciation for differences occur not just in governance. Take the example of treatment protocols in medical care. There are important differences in the way men’s and women’s bodies respond to drugs. For example, we now know that women respond differently to anti-retroviral drugs. We now know that some pain relievers work well for women but not for men.3

For years people believed that taking an aspirin a day would help prevent heart attacks. This turns out to be true for men but not for women. This mistake happened because, in the past, it was common for drug studies to be conducted on men but not on women, because researchers thought either that women would be just like men, so why complicate matters, or because they thought women were different from men, so why complicate matters!
For this reason, it was thought to be quite forward-thinking when, fifty years ago, the town of Framingham was selected by the U.S. Public Health Service as the site for a longitudinal health study (www.framingham.com/heart/backgrnd.htm, accessed February 1, 2009). Over 5,000 healthy residents between the ages of thirty and sixty years, both men and women, were enrolled as the first cohort of participants. It was the first major heart study to recruit women participants. Have not women been around longer than fifty years?

Here is more on difference and how it affects health policy: From a race standpoint, listen to these statistics: In Florida, the rates of death due to stroke and diabetes-related causes are twice as high for the state’s black population as compared to the white population. Among residents ages eighteen to sixty-four, Florida has one of the lowest levels of health insurance coverage in the nation, a rate of coverage that is particularly low for the state’s large Hispanic population (www.healthstatus2010.com/owh/disparities/ChartBookData_list.asp, accessed February 1, 2009).

The state of Colorado ranks among states with the lowest rates of death due to heart disease, cancer, and diabetes-related causes. But the rate of diabetes-related death is over twice as high in the black and Hispanic populations as in the white population (www.healthstatus2010.com/owh/disparities/ChartBookData_list.asp, accessed February 1, 2009).

Not only does diversity enhance our health studies; there is plenty of evidence that it improves the delivery of public services (Guy and Newman 2004; Johansen 2007). In terms of sustainable decisions, all these health findings make it obvious that all groups must be at the table if research is going to be relevant to them. In terms of other policy areas, there is evidence that a “mixed” workforce produces better decisions. For example, findings show that the U.S. Forest Service produces better land management decisions when those with program responsibilities represent all the constituents affected rather than only one or some (Brown and Harris 1993).

Gone are the days when the newcomer must emulate the usual: when women must be like men; when blacks must be as whites; when Latinos must be as Anglos. Decisions are more robust when they are hammered out with consideration for, and the participation of, all who are affected by the issue in question. Thus to the point: Diversity makes for more sustainable decisions.

Now to the third and final point: Diversity does make a difference—that is why it is resisted: It changes things. Beware the urge to believe in race-neutral policies that Ward Connerly and George W. Bush have advocated. Such policies require that we turn a blind eye to the difference that race makes, or gender makes, or religion makes. Such policies are the mechanism for maintaining advantage for the dominant group. They make it unlawful to look around the corner, to acknowledge the consequences of an action on one group as compared to another. Affirmative action was nothing more than a means to override our basic proclivity to associate with, hire, and promote those who are like ourselves. Such a mechanism has fallen badly out of favor, largely because of backlash—it perturbed the status quo and caused those who had been in the driver’s seat to have to move over.

All is not rainbows and roses when a culture diversifies. In fact, some equate increases in diversity with grief on the part of those who used to be in the dominant group. With loss of their customary way of doing things come anger and then grief and then a personal struggle to overcome the “us versus them” assessment of
things. In the movie *Gran Torino*, Clint Eastwood’s character is consumed with this struggle.

Turning from larger cultural implications to organizational issues, any organization is a microcosm of the cultural and social tensions in which it is embedded, and the organization is not necessarily a peaceable kingdom (Levine 2003). One study of Anglos and Hispanics indicates that in four-member teams, when one member is not like the others, job satisfaction scores go down (Ash 2008.)

Are things better for women, for African Americans, for Latinos, in our agencies? The question is not simply one of numbers, but rather one of chilly climates and foreignness. The question we must answer is whether there is room in the house for everyone. When “others” are among us, we *have* to move over to make room. This is when backlash happens—by those who enjoyed all that elbow room they used to have. I am reminded of my experience in the first professional job I had, working for a state agency in Augusta, Georgia, in the 1970s. I was the first woman to be hired there, the first northerner, and the youngest professional. To this day, I am not sure which was the biggest strike against me. But after being there for several months, I had the temerity to offer an alternative point of view at a staff meeting. The director’s quick response was “Whatever happened to the little girl I hired?” To question the usual, to be less than a docile child, was the unwelcome price the office paid for “diversity.”

In 1974 Adam Herbert wrote a piece for *Public Administration Review* in which he identified the role demands and dilemmas of minority public administrators. He painted a picture of a minority administrator who is confined to the lower-status agencies—those that redistribute wealth according to a strict protocol, rather than those that distribute it with high levels of discretion (Newman 1994). Are they now legitimate participants in statecraft? If the elections of Barack Obama and Bobby Jindal are any indication, the answer is yes. But we know that things are not the same all over. There are niches where diversity thrives, and there remain niches where it is resisted. True workforce diversity results from three forces: changing demographics, active representation, and workplace values (Choudhury 1996).

Accommodating diversity is a continuing challenge—in neighborhoods as well as in workforces. Traditional structures must give way to new systems for accommodating everyone. The more diversity there is, the more the tipping point is reached, and when that happens, assimilation stops and accommodation begins. David Pitts (2009) helps us to understand diversity’s three components: outreach and recruitment to ensure that the workforce is diverse; valuing differences so that performance capitalizes on the diverse strengths of workers; and pragmatic policies and programs, such as mentoring programs, succession planning, family-friendly programs, and alternative work arrangements, such as team-based units. The recently passed Lillie Ledbetter Act is an example of an accommodation to the difference in how wages are set. Laws that demand reasoned respect for each other help to cement the disparate pieces in the quilt.

The point is that diversity does make a difference, and it is resisted for this reason: Those who stand to lose advantage that they have grown accustomed to will resist it. In times of plenty, this is less of a problem than in times such as now, when there is not enough to go around.
Summary

To summarize, three points have been emphasized. First, diversity advances the quality of our democracy. Second, it makes for more sustainable decisions. And third, it does make a difference—that is why it is resisted. It changes things. It cannot be ignored or swept under the carpet. At its heart, public administration is about life in community—just as Mary Parker Follett knew, just as Mrs. T. J. Bowlker knew, just as Jane Addams knew. Is not this the field’s “inner woman” that has been overshadowed by principles and proverbs and counting exercises?

Recently I have been engaged in the most exciting research stream of my career. I, along with Meredith Newman and Sharon Mastracci, have been investigating emotion work in public service jobs. This is the sort of work that requires workers to manage their own emotions as well as the emotions of the citizen—in order to get the job done. In police work, disaster response teams, family and children’s services, emergency medical response, social casework, consumer services, and even teaching, we are learning that this uncountable, intangible dimension to public service is where many workers derive their greatest job satisfaction.

Performing emotion work convinces workers that they have done something worthwhile—that they made a difference in someone else’s life. How could we have been so blind to this all these years—how could we have ignored its presence despite all the textbooks that have been written about public performance, worker commitment, motivation, and service delivery? As I ponder these questions, I realize that this is one more example of diversity and the doors that remain locked shut when we allow the usual theories and perspectives to blind us to the totality of human behavior and the reality of practice.

Diversity makes a difference in scholarship in the academy, promotions in the workplace, notions of responsible work conduct, the foods we eat, the clothes we wear, how we greet one another, whether we make eye contact, and even whether and how we shake hands. It is what life is.

We are at a point of public service renewal. This is an opportunity to set the stage a little differently. We do not, nor will we ever, live in a post-racial, post-gendered world. We know one another by what the other looks like: male, female; of color or not; young, old. But gone are the days when women and people of color could only have their voices heard via the ventriloquist. After Madeline Albright and then Condoleezza Rice were named secretary of state, did anyone bat an eye when Hillary Clinton was named? After Obama’s presidency, will it be so dramatic when the next person of color runs for the office? I think not.

We all have the same origin. We all have the same destiny. Between the beginning and the end, we can make the passage so much richer if we embrace the differentness that gives meaning to our lives and enriches our experiences.

Let me close with some cheerleading. Most of us belong to multiple professional associations. To my way of thinking, the American Society for Public Administration is the very best among these because it has never forgotten the importance of diversity, not just as a goal but as a constant attribute among its members, its programs, and its services. It has the best grasp of the importance of diversity of any of the professional organizations in public administration and policy. This is because it keeps one foot in the world of practice, where things are real every day, and one foot in the world of theory, where “shoulds” and “coulds” trump “what is.” At this
conference, networks become like spider webs, connecting all kinds of people to one another. In this environment, diversity makes a difference, and we all gain.

NOTES

3. Research supported by the National Institute of Dental and Craniofacial Research (NIDR) has revealed important differences in the way that men and women respond to certain analgesics (pain relievers). The NIDR studies looked at men and women’s responses to analgesics following wisdom-tooth extractions. Investigators reported that kappa-opioids, a type of analgesic, produced significant pain relief following surgery in female patients but not in male patients. Prior to these studies, kappa-opioids were studied primarily in men. Because they provided little pain relief for men, they were thought to be ineffective at relieving pain. After women were included in studies on the drugs, researchers realized that the kappa-opioids did provide pain relief for women. The inclusion of women in these studies resulted in new pain relief options for women and highlighted the important role of gender in the body’s response to certain medications (www.womancando.org/difference/majorstudies.htm, accessed February 1, 2009).

REFERENCES


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