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SOURCES OF STRENGTH

Mobilizing Minority Racial, Ethnic, and Cultural Identities as Resources

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In 1903, Dr. W.E.B. Du Bois identified the color line as the defining problem of the 20th century. Despite the election of a self-identified African American of multiracial and multicultural heritage as the 44th President of the United States of America, race continues to be an important analytical concept that explains systems of organizing, group differences in experiences, personal identities, and organizational outcomes in the 21st century (Proudford & Nkomo, 2006; Tesler & Sears, 2010). Scholars often portray the racial minority experience as a daunting series of attempts to navigate "everyday racism" (Essed, 1990), by coping with microaggressions such as discrimination, bias, stereotyping, racialized sexism, and gendered racism that shape and reinforce structural inequities.

We focus this chapter on the sources of strength that equip racial minorities in navigating racial dynamics in social systems. Specifically, we highlight the ways in which racial minorities mobilize racial, ethnic, and cultural identities as resources for personal and organizational effectiveness. We consider race to be "a social construction [rather than a biological fact] by which individuals and groups are classified by others, are assigned labels, and/or assign labels to themselves" (Proudford & Nkomo, 2006). We also recognize that "race is both an individual characteristic and a social/political issue with personal and collective meaning" (Ospina & Foldy, 2009). Our research on navigating race as a part of everyday work activity builds theoretical and practical bridges between diversity, inclusion, and positive organizational scholarship in important ways. Rather than study the sources or effects of bias per se, we have inquired into the experiences of racial minority professionals as they endeavor to handle complicated, and sometimes subtle or ambiguous, race-related dynamics that surface during everyday work activities.

A Resource Lens on Racial Identities at Work

While many of the racial minorities in our studies acknowledge the challenges of being racially underrepresented in their work groups, organizations, or professions, they also offer a resource view of how race-related experiences and social meanings about race can promote work effectiveness in racially diverse settings. Navigating race involves resourceful maneuvering among simultaneously occurring constraints and possibilities. In accordance with a burgeoning stream of research on positive identities at work (see Dutton, Roberts, & Bednar, 2010; Roberts & Dutton, 2009), our studies illuminate multiple pathways through which a minority racial identity may also be a source of strength that promotes favorable outcomes at work.

Sociologists and psychologists have established that identities are associated with resources. Sociocultural identities such as racial identity provide social status, relationships, and cultural experiences that generate "capital" in the sense that they provide access to opportunities and produce valuable insights that can equip people to interact effectively with social contexts (Bourdieu, 2001). The field of Positive Organizational Scholarship (POS) examines how organizations can discover and leverage this capital. Even so, with respect to race, researchers have typically classified dominant, majority cultural capital as being more desirable, valuable, and privileged than nondominant cultural capital, which is associated with minority and lower-status racial groups. Our research reveals several ways in which nondominant cultural capital also creates value for individuals who work in diverse organizations, through symbolism, relationship building, resilience, and creativity. This perspective is aligned with the research that supports that nondominant cultural capital is a valuable resource for building relationships and establishing legitimacy within one's own racial, ethnic, and/or cultural identity group (Carter, 2005). Nondominant cultural capital also equips leaders from racial minority groups—who may cultivate valuable leadership characteristics from their experiences as marginalized members of society, including self-reliance, creativity, diligence, perseverance, biculturalism, attunement to others' perceptions, and relationships with constituencies (Bell & Nkomo, 2001; Ospina & Foldy, 2009; Parker & Ogilvie, 1996; Thomas & Gabarro, 1999).

Toward a Typology of Nondominant Cultural Capital as a Resource

Our research on minority professionals (Cha & Roberts, 2014; Roberts, Cha, & Kim, 2014; Roberts, Settles, & Jellison, 2008) illuminates the resourcefulness of racial minorities as they navigate race in everyday work activities. The participants in our studies emphasized how the simultaneity of their race, gender, and age creates unique opportunities for engaging their nondominant cultural capital to increase personal and organizational effectiveness. The range of resources that are associated with nondominant cultural capital extends from surface-level
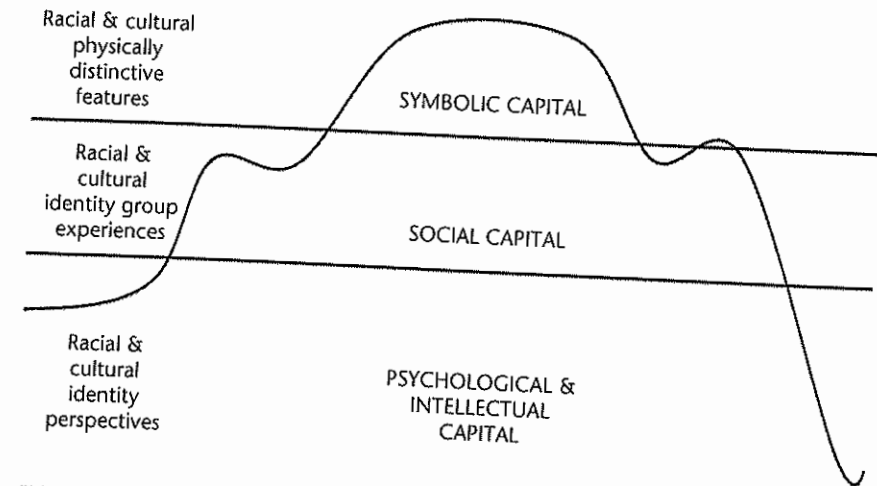
FIGURE 3.1 Types of nondominant cultural capital associated with minority racial identities.

characteristics to less visible yet still substantive sources of culturally based knowledge and insight (Figure 3.1).

Symbolic capital. Symbolic capital is a resource that minorities generate and mobilize via the power of their physical representation of diversity. While much has been written on tokenism and its deleterious effects on relationships and the well-being of minorities (e.g., Jackson, Thoits, & Taylor, 1995; Kanter, 1977; Yoder, 2002), it is important to acknowledge that some minorities empower themselves by increasing the salience of their distinctiveness in the workplace. For example, a young female Asian American journalist in one of our qualitative studies of identity remarked:

> [When] I got sent to [a particular] bureau, I think in terms of being young, Asian—you know, young, female, and ethnic, is that they were looking to brighten up the bureau and get some more personality. And I do, actually. I have a candy jar. Actually that's something that's . . . kind of apolitical but political . . . And the thing is it makes people come by your desk, they remember you, you have established a presence. And they think fondly of you.

Symbolic capital can also have deeper meanings that mobilize social change. The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., a symbolic leader of social justice and inclusion, embodied the power of nondominant symbolic capital. When Dr. King and other civil rights movement demonstrators were physically beaten by racist leaders and citizens during nonviolent protests, their struggle symbolized the hypocrisy between America's stated ideals and its legalized practices of brutal oppression (Roberts, Roberts, O'Neill, & Blake-Beard 2008).

Social capital. Social capital is a resource minorities can generate and mobilize via the power of building connections with members of their own identity groups by increasing the salience of their cultural backgrounds in the workplace. This way of engaging nondominant cultural capital was featured in Carter's (2005) foundational work on the topic; she examined how black adolescents used non-dominant cultural capital to build relationships with one another. Subsequent research on racial minority professionals also illustrates the value of nondominant cultural capital in generating social capital with other racial minorities (Ely & Thomas, 2001). For example, we interviewed a 30-year-old African American female pediatrician who said, "If the patient is a minority, there is an automatic trust. It's a lot easier. I've had mothers and grandmothers say to me, 'I'm so proud of you.' I get that from the janitorial staff as well. I am always respectful."

Nondominant cultural capital also helps generate social capital in racially diverse situations. People who feel marginalized are more attuned to social cues (Frable, Blackstone, & Scherbaum, 1990). This social attunement equips minorities with cross-cultural competencies that promote relationship building across dimensions of difference. An example of social capital might be found in U.S. President Barack Obama's willingness to discuss aspects of his multi-faceted racial background as a way of connecting with other Americans through his public address ("A More Perfect Union") during the 2008 Presidential campaign.

Psychological capital. Nondominant cultural capital also generates psychological capital—through the benefits of group identification and self-esteem. Racial minority groups often serve as identity bases that provide belongingness and positive regard, both of which are valuable in fulfilling human needs and protecting people from psychologically threatening experiences. For example, Henderson and Bell's chapter in the current volume explains how racial pride fosters resilience and buffers the deleterious effects of racism on racial minorities.

Human/intellectual capital. Nondominant cultural capital also generates forms of human and intellectual capital (e.g., abilities and knowledge), particularly creativity. For example, minority scholars often draw upon nondominant cultural capital in multiple stages of the creative process of inquiry: building relationships with diverse colleagues and students (drawing on social capital), generating new research ideas (drawing on creativity), reviewing others' research (drawing on creativity), and obtaining access to research samples (drawing on social capital). These multiple forms of capital combined can be a source of strength for furthering creative research. (This book, *Positive Organizing in a Global Society*, is an example of such creative bridging. Our reexaminations of diversity-related phenomena through POS lenses have opened up new pathways of discovery and practice for those who study and shape 21st-century organizations.)

A Silver Lining

In sum, our research studies suggest that having a minority racial identity in the workplace—though it is often associated with significant stereotyping, bias, and discrimination—can have a silver lining for those who view that identity as a resource. Indeed, the very tokenism and marginalization that create challenges and stress for racial minorities can, paradoxically, also be sources of strength that empower minorities not only to navigate racism but also to make rich, unique, and powerful contributions to their work groups and organizations.

For Practitioners: Two Tips for Mobilizing Cultural Identities as Resources

1. **Take stock of your nondominant cultural capital.** Many of us belong, or have belonged in the past, to a nondominant identity group (e.g., being younger or older than one's teammates, holding a lower-status position in the organization, or being the token person from a country on a multi-national team). If you revealed them, how could your nondominant identities serve as sources of strength in the workplace (e.g., as compelling symbols of the qualities you bring to a team or shared identities linking you to others)? Use this reflection to tap into the cross-cultural sensitivity, resilience, and creativity that are the unexpected fruits of having experienced marginalization.

2. **Seek to understand and support colleagues who draw on their nondominant cultural capital to benefit your organization.** Your support signals that colleagues can leverage their marginalized identities without fearing further marginalization at work. But don't pressure colleagues to do so: People's degree of comfort with their nondominant identities varies.

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