



A Book Ombuds Can Use: A Review of How to Be an Equity Mindset Leader

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ABSTRACT

In this review of Samuel Cohn’s book on *Race, Gender, and Discrimination at Work*, I summarized Cohn’s foundational principles to cultivate an equity mindset to eradicate discrimination in the workplace. The book highlighted many key points that the Ombuds can use to continue to “Promote dignity, diversity, equity, inclusion, and belonging” across the organizational spectrum, and sustain excellence in the workplace

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KEYWORDS

ombuds equity mindset, social inquiry



INTRODUCTION

A well-established sociologist Dr. Samuel Cohn (2000) explored in his book—*Race, Gender, and Discrimination at Work*—the ways to eradicate racial and gender discrimination in the workplace and achieve equity. The issue of racial and gender inequities has empirically been revealed in Cohn's work for the past 6 decades. Two key issues throughout his book validated the notion that: (a) inequity begins with the imbalance of work wages and continues into (b) the stereotyping of gender roles in the workplace (Cohn, 2000). Throughout the seven-part sections of the book, Cohn's (2000) social inquiry about (in)equity is useful to Ombuds' work to non-discriminatory and neutral approach to resolving issues and achieving equity within the organizational spectrum.

Cohn's book is a great reminder that neutrality can be achieved through equitable workplace practices, especially when imbalanced, biased, and discriminatory situations. Cohn (2000) described strategies for how leaders—including the Ombuds role—can examine deeper inequity across all institutional sectors. I highlight the most salient skills for the work in the Ombuds office:

1. Gender and racial inequality exist in U.S. society. Ombuds can work towards eradicating the inequities by highlighting the statistical trends or data within the organization.
2. Employers play an important role in equitable hiring. Ombuds can focus on paying attention to the equitable organizational hiring policies and practices in the leadership decision-making.
3. When there are prejudice and attitudes issues arise toward race and gender inequities in the workplace (e.g., a gap in gender wages), the Ombuds effect change by ensuring an equity mindset is at the forefront of institutional values. For example, the Ombuds can highlight pay differentiation between race and gender at the institution.
4. Lower rates of African American employment do not equate to poor educational qualifications. Cohn (2000) found that "Median levels of black educational attainment are nearly identical to those for whites" (p. 169). At the institutional level, the Ombuds can shine a light when recruiting candidates to the workplace that the educational qualifications should be viewed *prima facie* (*on its face*) and address any implicit bias that may occur during the process.
5. "When the market does not eliminate discrimination, the only remedy that remains is law" (Cohn, 2000, p. 170). Ombuds can serve as a confidential resource to interpret and explain institutional policies and procedures to ameliorate discrimination (and cultivate an equity mindset) in the workplace for all people.

SOCIAL INQUIRY OF INEQUITY

Cohn (2000) begins with a major theme of **inequity genesis**: "*Discrimination is the provision of unequal benefits to people of different ascriptive statuses despite identical qualifications and merit*" (p. 3; italics in original). Cohn describes ascriptive to mean a feature given since birth—such as race, gender, or ethnicity. He continues to remind readers that discrimination against a minoritized individual or less-privileged members of society can lead to an "attitude of hostility" and harm (Cohn, 2000, p. 4). In my view, Cohn urges leaders in positions of power that time is of the essence to confront workplace discrimination with the equity mindset regardless of where people land in the political spectrum.

In his second theme, Cohn (2000) identifies that the work on **equity mindset** has made significant progress in the field of education. He examined the U.S. census data from the 1950s to 1995 to conclude that, "Education gaps between blacks and whites have practically disappeared" (Cohn, 2000, p. 10). Other than education, inequities have not dissipated at the workplace and continue to persist through occupational sex-typing or status segregation (Cohn, 2000, pp. 14-23). Such inequities call for the Ombuds to emerge as a beacon of truth for the



workplace—namely, in the values of respect, integrity, diversity, equity, inclusion, as well as freedom from bias, harassment, or discrimination.

EQUITY MINDSET FOR CHANGE

While Ombuds may be tasked with monumental work (e.g., examining institutional equity) in some workplace settings, there is support within the professional organization to equip Ombuds to be successful in their work. In the second half of his book, Cohn (2000) sequentially provided eight key critical insights—that challenge some deep-rooted economic theories—to address equity and eradicate discrimination in the workplace.

1. Discrimination in the workplace is often implicit. Using economic free-market theory—The Becker Model—where “individual firms are capable of trading goods under the conditions of the highest rationality without anyone having unique or permanent advantages” that implicitly can lead to discriminatory action against the employee (Cohn, 2000, p. 30). Cohn expanded on the Becker model to highlight the implicit bias and strong preferences people often do not realize. In other words, workplace discrimination against or preferential treatment for another person is not easily identified on the surface.
2. Rational decisions based on economic utility sometimes inadvertently discriminate against people of color and women. Using rationality—Decision Theory—where economic “survival is [the] primary utility” in the decision-making process can inadvertently exhibit a discriminatory impression against Black and women (Cohn, 2000, p. 40). Careful decision-making in the workplace should center on equity instead solely on economic and rational efficiency (Cohn, 2000).
3. Economic competition in the marketplace increases the likelihood of discriminatory practices. Economic forces—Buffering Theory—put pressure or competition in the marketplace to produce more with fewer resources. Cohn (2000) critiqued that extreme buffering between market competition and economic instability can inadvertently increase discriminatory practices. Namely, Cohn (2000) highlighted the historical practices of hiring a cheaper labor force (i.e., women of color) when institutions needed to save their bottom line (pp. 40-49).
4. Occupational sex-typing perpetuates inequity in the workplace. Employers determine—Demand-Side Theories of Occupational Sex-Typing—who is hired for the job are often stereotyped based on their gender identification. Cohn challenges that occupational sex-typing is a tautological error because the theory did not sufficiently provide empirical evidence. Cohn revealed that institutional culture is important to understand why occupational sex-typing occurs in the first place. Put simply, sex-typing in the workplace presents an illogical manner that the roots of such practice are vague, ambiguous, and inequitable (Cohn, 2000).
5. Workplace hiring and retention need to be based on sound reasons supported by empirical evidence. A reasonable assumption is that human workers are trained to become more productive than produce more products for their employer—Human Capital Theory. Cohn argues that historically, employers’ decision to save training costs by hiring more men than women because women have a higher turnover rate than men. Cohn challenges the historical assumption by showing empirical data that women have “better health and lower rates of morbidity” than men (Cohn, 2000, p. 84 citing Preston, 1976).
6. Comparable Worth Theory tests the notion that gender is a determinate factor to be paid more for their wages as well as estimating their value solely based on their gender identity (Cohn, 2000). Cohn pointed out that such theory is a foolish worldview inconsistent with the labor market data on gender and race on economic productivity (pp. 129-130). Cohn argues that individual contribution to the marketplace is more crucial, rather than comparing the worth of an individual based solely on their gender.



7. Discrimination in the workplace negatively constrains productivity. Cohn maintains that the workplace bureaucracy and environment—Production Constraint Theory—place women and minorities at a disadvantage in accepting lower wages and constrain their capacity for productivity. In other words, Cohn challenges the notion that the gender differential treatment is caused by the true productivity differences between women and men. Put simply, Production Constraint Theory assumes “wages are somehow equal to worker's true productivity” (Cohn, 2000, p. 131 citing Hicks, 1964).
8. The twin assumptions of how racial categorization living in a certain geographic location (e.g., city or suburbs) and their mode of transportation traveling to their employment is discriminatory. Cohn critiques the Spatial Mismatch hypothesis that traveling to a place of work from where they reside—using mass transportation or individual vehicle—differentiates the racial makeup of employment. Cohn cited multiple scholars and empirical data that “found no relation between the distance from jobs and unemployment for minority youth” (p. 160).

WHAT THE OMBUDS CAN USE FROM COHN'S BOOK

In the concluding chapter of his book, Cohn postulates key principles that could be useful for Ombuds to illuminate an equity mindset in the workplace. As I reflect on how Cohn humanized ways to eradicate racial and gender discrimination, I am convinced that Cohn's (2000) book will advance Ombuds' special role to provide fair, unbiased, and neutral/equitable services in the workplace. Even when the workplace is dynamic and constantly changing, Cohn's (2000) book is nevertheless timeless wisdom in his book provides a glimpse of how equity is achievable. Looking into equipping the next generation of Ombuds, I hope future research will continue to address more about the elimination of racial educational gaps (e.g., Elliott, 2020) and identity-conscious supervision in the workplace (e.g., Brown et al., 2019) as well as valuing intersecting identities—such as disabilities, LGBTQIA2S+, veteran status, and so on.



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