

Was It Race, Age, Gender or a Case of Being Overweight?:

Hiring Diversity at the Fairfax Metropolitan Hospital

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Did the HR committee's reluctance to hire this best candidate, a Doctor of Nursing, stem from her being a person of color, foreigner, her young age of 32 years, or was it because she was overweight? This paper examines a diversity challenge in the potential hiring of a highly qualified candidate for a Director position in a hospital plagued with diversity and outdated operational procedures. The perceived problem with the candidate is not that she is Sri Lankan, but that she is age 32 and overweight. The case is summarized, along with ethical frames for addressing the problem, and an assortment of other considerations to help with the ethical dilemma. The paper is concluded with a reflection on the integration of a critical view, which has the power to shift perceived diversity identity from static to fluid possibilities. This is a reflection on a diversity case presented by Allard (2009).

In this paper I discuss the diversity dilemma present in the case titled "Fairfax Metropolitan Hospital: The Candidate" (see Harvey & Allard: pp. 325-327). I begin by offering a summary of the situation, which involves a young and overweight candidate, who has first class credentials, applying for a senior director position in a hospital that is plagued by diversity and operational problems. This is followed by a summary of three ethical approaches to the HR director's dilemma. I then address some ethical

responsibilities for the HR director, what might be ethical decisions using the three ethical approaches, what I would do as HR director, and my preferred theory of ethics. In a final reflection I introduce a critical approach to organizational behavior, and how such an approach could be integrated to destabilize a static perception of diverse identity.

Summary of the Case Situation

Dr. Saryn Soysa, born in Sri Lanka, has applied for a job as Director of Nursing at Fairfax Metropolitan Hospital. Dr. Soysa is a well-educated young woman of age 32, who happens to have a very heavyset body type. Dr. Soysa attended a prestigious US university and is now a US citizen. She holds advanced credentials for the position and arrives with excellent references. She has excellent work experience and she is listed as the best candidate for the position. However, the HR hiring committee is struggling with the idea of hiring Dr. Soysa. In short, she is fat, and being fat may not be a good fit for Fairfax Metropolitan Hospital. Her age is also considered to be potentially problematic.

The HR committee is struggling, and so is Jorge the HR manager. As the spouse of a Mexican-American, I should situate that Jorge is a Spanish name for “George”. It would appear at first glance that Jorge is Hispanic and we conceive that both can be considered as from minority ethnic groups.

Concerns raised by the hiring committee include that Dr. Soysa is overweight and that may not produce desirable optics given that the Director will be seen as a public position. She is also younger than others and this might not look good to the public. What if the experienced nurses don’t accept her? All on the committee agree that Dr. Soysa is the best candidate. In summary, Jorge knows that the issues at hand are not about ethnicity but *age* and her being *over-weight*.

It should be noted that Fairfax Metropolitan Hospital (FMH) is under considerable pressure to reform some of its practices. Accreditation inspectors have found that FMH does not have a diverse staff, and this is evidenced in every hospital unit. FMH has resolved to hire staff to represent the racial/ethnic diversity of the community. Outdated procedures and inefficient practices is another area of concern for accreditors.

The Director of Nursing has recently retired and another nursing accreditation visit looms on the horizon.

Three Ethical Approaches to Jorge's Dilemma

De-ontological approach

The essence of this approach is the relationship between the individual and the community, and it stems from a sense of the individual being subservient to duties and moral obligations (see Mcnett, 2009). This is referenced in the common vernacular as “do unto others as you would have them do unto you”. This approach to ethics can be considered as rooted in religion and such terms as “faith”.

Take-away: Using the de-ontological approach Jorge must do the right thing in terms of the greater community. How will hiring or not hiring Dr. Soysa be doing the right thing for the greater community?

Teleological approach

This approach focuses on the ends that can be achieved from contemplated actions (McNett, 2009). A key question could be “what will be the result of this action?” While the de-ontological approach might be concerned to do the right thing, the teleological approach takes it farther: what are we producing by these actions? This is also present to some degree in the meta-theory known as social (relational) constructionism, which sees all results as grounded in joint action (see Kavanagh, 2008),

Take-away: If Jorge is to use the teleological approach he must consider the effects of his actions on all parties concerned.

Caring approach

This ethical approach is about caring and emotional and psychological connection for persons (see McNett, 2009). The organization must shift its concerns away from optics to the level of caring that it has for the individuals that work within it.

Take-away: Jorge will have to consider to what degree the organization cares about employees and to what degree a vision of diversity fits within that. This is a deeply personal ethic and may be difficult to frame in organizational language.

Ethical Responsibilities of the HR Director

The HR director, Jorge, must decide what is best for the hospital. He is under pressure to make some changes and improve the diversity situation, as well as improve the processes of the hospital. He is concerned about optics, whether employees will take direction from a young director, reactions of the CEO, and public perception about health given Dr. Soysa's weight. In other words, Jorge must find a way to balance conflicting interests. Nevertheless his core responsibilities are to the functional health of the organization and this can only be accomplished by hiring the best candidate, which seems to be Dr. Soysa. The other concerns can be sorted out collaboratively with the various persons affected. The issue of health can be reframed to include heavysset persons, which is more inclusive and therefore meeting the requirements for a general actioning of diversity concerns.

Ethically right decisions

De-ontological decision

An ethical de-ontological decision could be to not hire Dr. Soysa on the basis that hiring her could be a difficult transition for the existing staff, CEO and the community around optics.

Teleological decision

An ethical teleological decision would be to hire Dr. Soysa and work to lead the entire community of CEO, personnel and other stakeholders into a collaborative and well-functioning relationship.

Caring decision

An ethical caring decision could shift in either direction: to hire or not hire. What is important here is for Jorge to be aware of what exactly the hospital cares about. While he has a fiduciary duty to work with the accreditor recommendations, if he feels genuinely that the community is not ready for a big change then he should be transparent of how the organization's caring is directed and use this as a basis for his decision.

Possibilities for What I Might Do as HR director

As HR director I would list my concerns and the concerns of the hiring committee, the directives of the accreditors and what those directives will produce. I would also do a SWOT analysis of hiring and not hiring Dr. Soysa, and engage the opinions of the key stakeholders in the organization. The bottom line is that the best candidate needs to be hired to meet the needs of the accreditors and attend to the survival of the organization. On that basis I would do what I could to lead the organization to move forward, and do what we need to do to hire and work successfully with the best candidate.

My Preferred Ethics Theory

My preferred theory is the teleological theory because I believe that whatever decision we make produces a relational result. Diversity has been a major issue at FMH and it needs to be addressed for the organization to move forward. If hiring Dr. Souza or anyone else is going to have a good outcome, it is by joint action, the efforts of all those involved.

Final Reflection with a Critical Twist

While it is important to understand and operate from ethical models in decision making on diversity I would like to include another analytical lens, that of a critical view

toward organization. A critical view is described by Thompson and McHugh (1995) as having three components:

Persons are viewed as an evolving relational, embedded and distributed self

The meaning of what it is to be a person or group shifts when we consider persons and peoples as co-constructed, or emerging in co-evolving relations. An individual is much more than overweight or limited by age, and thus there are multiple possibilities.

Language creates social realities rather than describing reality

Language becomes a form of social action taking place in the real world and reinforcing and changing the world. Are we transforming or reinforcing social realities that limit diversity and its benefits?

Knowledge shifts from a knowable world 'out there' to a focus on social realities

Are we focusing on preconceived knowledge or social realities? Letting go of what we think we know about persons and peoples may be a way of honoring that we are in a global society, and that our pre-conceived assumptions may no longer work on their own. Focus on social realities that are considered to be multiple, local-historical, and made in action. This includes the social realities that we create in act/response (joint action) with stakeholders and consumers. We now live in more culturally and ethnically integrated communities and workplaces. Members of collective societies now co-exist with cultural backgrounds that celebrate the individual self (see Kavanagh, 2013).

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