

## ARTICLE

# The production of racial inequality within and among organizations

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**Abstract**

This article examines the production of racial inequality. Although most research concerned with racial inequality focuses exclusively on individuals, we argue that higher level actors, namely, organizations, contend with racial inequality in much the same way that people do. Using prior research on race and organizations, this paper illustrates that understanding how organizations produce and experience racial inequality is necessary. We argue that racial inequality regimes have the capacity to operate on people, but also among organizations.

## 1 | INTRODUCTION

American researchers analyzing race and organizations primarily do so at the individual level. A person's categorization as Black, White, Asian, or Latino, that is, their race, affects their chances of accessing and receiving adequate employment, education, and healthcare. Sociological evidence confirms that organizations produce inequality or systematic disparities between racial groups. All else being equal, Whites have far better experiences and outcomes with the organizations—firms (Kalev, 2014; Kalleberg, 2009), schools (Condrón, 2009; Zhang, 2005), hospitals (Schnittker, 2007), and so forth—that we depend upon for our livelihood than racial minorities. A few examples illustrate this point.

Jobs employing a disproportionate number of racial minorities have lower pay than those employing mostly White males (Baron & Newman, 1990). Employers are more inclined to hire White workers with incarceration records than Black workers without one (Pager & Quillian, 2005). People living in Black and Hispanic neighborhoods have less access to employment assistance social services than people living in majority White neighborhoods (Allard, 2009). Affluent White families living in suburban school districts leverage resources intended for racial minorities to gain educational advantages for their own children (Lewis-McCoy, 2014).

Though important, this focus on people limits our ability to understand the intersection of race and organizations to its fullest extent. To date, we have unnecessarily confined race to a property of the individual—people have a race and this influences their organizational experiences. This paper argues that we should strive to understand race as a property that operates at the organizational level as well (Wooten, 2006). By doing so, we can imagine organizations as having an identity (Dutton & Dukerich, 1991) tied to race, and as a result, having the capacity to be racialized in much the same way that people are (Wooten, 2015).

There have been few efforts to conceive of race as a characteristic that organizations possess or at the very least a characteristic with which organizations must contend. In the United States especially, this belies our history and the

reality that many organizations began with explicitly racial goals (e.g., Historically Black Colleges' missionary focus to educate Black Americans) and at times decidedly racist practices (e.g., White Citizens Councils' missionary zeal to prolong racial segregation). Furthermore, this overlooks how we already classify organizations in our everyday practice. For instance, *Ebony* and *The Root* are Black media organizations whereas *The New York Times* and *Slate Magazine* consider themselves "mainstream" media organizations claiming to use no particular racial lens to cover or interpret newsworthy events.

Racial ideology, specifically the type advocating black inferiority, is a taken-for-granted aspect of organizational life. That is, in the United States, the racial ideology of Black inferiority is institutionalized. Social and economic organizations have been historically biased toward Whites (Katznelson, 2005). The United States constructed policies that supported the rights of white Americans to pursue life, liberty, and happiness while simultaneously denying other racial groups the same protections. Omi and Winant (1986) refer to this as a White racial project—an effort designed to protect and promote the livelihoods of White Americans. This project was faithfully and dutifully executed by people within organizations when they denied racial minorities entry into schools, treatment in hospitals, and employment opportunities.

In this context, separate organizations emerged to serve racial minority group members, Black Americans in particular. Organizations themselves became racialized and most strongly identified with the racial group they served. Despite this, there has been very little cross-fertilization among those that study the problems of race and those that study the problems of organizing. Consequently, we cannot adequately speak to how race affects organizations with the same confidence that we can for people.

We know that race serves as a basis for stratifying people. Research shows that wage inequalities are largely explained by the exclusion of Black workers from well-paying jobs (Huffman & Cohen, 2004; Tomaskovic-Devey, 1993). This can occur through social closure processes, where people from high-status groups seek to control and preserve opportunities and resources, while simultaneously locking out lower status groups (Tomaskovic-Devey, 2014). Might a similar phenomenon occur at the organizational level? Likewise, we know that race orients individual behavior. In their analysis of interviews with Chicago-area employers, Kirschenman and Neckerman (1991) found that many employers believed that White workers were superior to Black workers with regard to work ethic, attitudes, and other soft skills such as leadership. But does race serve a similar function for organizations? To the extent that race continues to shape the lives of people, much of its formative power operates at the organizational level. Yet race can operate both on and through organizations. Examining how this occurs will help us better understand the ubiquitous nature of race and racism.

We illustrate the utility of our thesis that race affects organizations and the organizing process by exploring several paths below. Using examples from the sociological literature, we argue that like people, organizations are racially stratified social actors, that race informs the strategic orientation of organizations, and that studying the impact of race on the organizing process is beneficial to those interested in ameliorating racial inequality at the individual level. We use a range of organizations from educational to protest to advance our argument.

## 2 | RACE AND ORGANIZATIONAL STRATIFICATION

Understanding the factors that stratify organizations, or give one organization a higher rank than another, has a long history within the organization studies tradition. However, studies of the factors that stratify organizations typically focus on characteristics such as organizational size tied to its financial assets and number of employees (Baum, 1996) or organizational status tied to a formal ranking system (Sauder & Lancaster, 2006). Therefore, our understanding of the characteristics that stratify organizations remains limited.

For example, Stinchcombe (1965) argued that organizational stratification resulted from the fact that some organizations offer their participants more money and prestige, and therefore have a higher rank than others. Perhaps the most well-known statement on stratification and organizations stems from Pfeffer and Salancik's (1978) resource dependence theory. The dependence upon other organizations for resources leads to stratification. For example, a

bank's ability to lend money puts it in a position of power over an organization seeking to borrow from it. Even neo-institutional statements on organizations recognize inequality exists. Scholars such as DiMaggio and Powell (1983) and Meyer and Rowan (1977) propose that stratification, or the unequal relationship between certain types of organizations, leads to undue influence. For instance, the state can force organizations to choose similar strategies and configurations as a means of complying with its regulations.<sup>1</sup>

So while organization theorists are interested in stratification, they have yet to bring race into their theorizing. We propose that understanding organizations, not just the people that occupy them, as being situated within inequality regimes is a promising bridge between these two lines of inquiry. Sociologist Joan Acker (2006: 443) argues that inequality regimes or the "loosely interrelated practices, processes, actions and meanings" responsible for the "systematic disparities between participants in power" and those lacking power are politically, historically, and culturally specific.

In the United States, these regimes have privileged Whiteness or White people so much so that for much of the nation's history Black Americans faced near exclusion from organizations (Branch, 2011). Within organizations, it is these regimes that provide Whites with the tools to make claims for better jobs, wages, and positions than their Black counterparts (Avent-Holt & Tomaskovic-Devey, 2010). White employees can rely upon the inequality regimes to provide them with a language and vocabulary (Lamont, Beljeau, & Clair, 2014) to stipulate why they are more deserving of better organizational opportunities than Black employees.

Our failure to investigate how these regimes affect organizations and not just the people located within them largely stems from the tendency to underappreciate organizations as social actors. Yes, people populate organizations. However, these people subjugate their own interests to promote the organization's interests. In exchange for pay or prestige, people put forth tremendous effort to ensure that the organization gets the resources it needs to prosper. In this way, the organization is a social entity in and of itself.

Racialized inequality regimes are consequential for both people and organizations. These regimes are taken-for-granted and embedded within the everyday activities that organizations rely upon to perpetuate themselves. Inequality regimes, particularly ones built around race, then have the power to shape the organizing process or the organization's ability to lay claim to rewards relative to its competitors. The environment that an organization is embedded within can shape the flow of resources to an organization based on racialized ideas. This results in the privileging of certain types of organizations over others; racialized inequality regimes make it possible for actors supporting White racial projects to construct claims that disadvantage organizations that do not serve this project. Racialized inequality regimes give credence to claims that organizations not serving the White racial project deserve fewer financial and political resources than those that do.

The question remains as to how our understanding of inequality or race would change if scholars adopted the approach advocated here. Would situating organizations within inequality regimes and understanding them as racially stratified actors change anything? Reviewing current approaches to inequality offers an answer to this question.

One path taken by inequality scholars is to investigate the relationship between organizational practices such as affirmative action offices or equal opportunity programs and the incorporation of racial minority group members. Scholars have concluded that merely having such organizational practices does not guarantee that true increases in the underrepresented will result. On the contrary, at times these practices are created so that organizations can claim to care about diversifying without actually doing so (Edelman, 1990). Even when organizations care about diversifying, the outcome may not be what was intended (Berrey, 2015).

Diversifying organizations has typically resulted in selective inclusivity (Berrey, 2015) or a creaming of the crop (Lacireno-Paquet, Holyoke, Moser, & Henig, 2002). In both instances, organizations target "high-status, upwardly mobile, or otherwise culturally appealing" (Berrey, 2015:8) minorities for inclusion while excluding underrepresented people and groups that would not add to the organization's prestige.

In light of this, scholars have set out to identify how organizational routines disadvantage those they should presumably help. Damaske's (2009) qualitative study of a university career services office provides a compelling

example of this approach. Though ostensibly designed to equip Black and Latino students with the skills needed to attain employment, the career services office developed a set of routines that precluded this outcome. Faced with the reality of local employers' preference for nonminority students, the career service office responded by turning away qualified Black and Latino/a students in favor of White women and international male students, regardless of their qualifications.

Damaske's analysis is unique in that it illustrates how multiple forces combine to produce inequality, but also that inequality can exist for both people *and* organizations. Local employers signaled to the career services staff the kind of employees they were looking for and that the school was a less than ideal source for job candidates. Moreover, the staff faced serious pressure from university officials to improve job placement. These forces contributed to the development of organizational routines at the microlevel that advantaged Whites and international students, while disadvantaging Black and Latino/a students.

Clearly, Damaske's analysis implicates the career services office, but it also acknowledges the role employers and university officials played in creating a context where inequality persisted. Consequently, to reduce the disadvantage certain groups face, we must understand the full spectrum of the mechanisms that contribute to inequality—from organizational sources to societal characterizations regarding race and prestige that are beyond the control of any one organization (Stinchcombe, 1965).

Prestige is an important resource for higher education organizations that school administrators spend significant quantities of time and effort to solidify and maintain (Elsbach & Kramer, 1996; Sauder & Lancaster, 2006). Yet, as the school's student body shifted to the point where 90% of the students identified as a member of a racial minority group, the school's prestige dropped among local employers. The school was not supplying local employers with the "ideal" recruits. The school had trouble gaining the reputational resources it needed to sustain its status as a preferred base of recruitment.

The university, not just students seeking career services, was negatively affected by an inequality regime privileging Whiteness. This regime prevented the school from laying claim to rewards (Tomaskovic-Devey, Avent-Holt, Zimmer, & Harding, 2009) relative to those schools with a larger contingent of White students. The school suffered from its relatively low position within a stratification scheme that favored Whiteness. As the university attempted to gain more prestige among local employers, it constructed organizational practices that disadvantaged racial minority students. Navigating an inequality regime at the organizational level led to more inequality at the individual level.

We can learn a lot by reanalyzing works similar to Damaske's (2009), yet other scholars have tackled the issues of race and organizational stratification more directly in their work. Perhaps it is no coincidence that two examples of this approach involve Historically Black Colleges. Visible vestiges of the United States' White racial project, Historically Black Colleges began in the antebellum period with the purpose of educating Black Americans (Anderson, 1988). Following Emancipation, northern missionary societies, Black religious groups, philanthropic donors, the federal government, and southern state educational authorities established even more Black colleges (Anderson, 1988). From their very beginnings, these schools stood in opposition to the Traditionally White Colleges that denied Blacks entry. Any achievements taking place at Black colleges occurred within a stratification system privileging Whiteness.

Wooten (2015) devotes significant attention to documenting how race affected the Historically Black Colleges' ability to gain political and financial support. When it was legal for Traditionally White Colleges to formally and informally deny Black students admission, state legislatures routinely withheld financial appropriations from Historically Black Colleges. Historically Black Colleges were denied access to funds that would have enabled them to pay faculty higher salaries and incorporate the latest educational technologies. Underfunding Historically Black Colleges supported the overarching goals of a White racial project intent on locking Black Americans out of lucrative social, political, and economic opportunities.

Even after it became illegal for Traditionally White Colleges to deny Black students admission, it remained difficult for Historically Black Colleges to gain resources. For instance, now tasked with racially integrating Traditionally White

Colleges, state legislators routinely proposed merging Historically Black Colleges with traditionally White ones or closing Black colleges altogether. State officials theorized that merging or closing Black colleges would result in Black students matriculating to traditionally White ones. These discussions fail to recognize the expertise that Historically Black Colleges have developed in regards to the education of Black students and the reality that Historically Black Colleges remain the primary choice for a significant proportion of Black students looking to attend college. We can trace the lack of political support for the schools that educate the majority of Black students within the Southern context to inequality regimes that privilege Whiteness and White educational settings regardless of their ability to attract and retain Black students (Wooten, 2015).

Similarly, Aldon Morris' (2015) study of American sociology situates people and organizations as racially stratified actors. Du Bois' inability to gain recognition for his contributions and advancements to the discipline take center stage, yet this research also highlights the consequences of this for the historically Black organizations where Du Bois worked—Atlanta University and the Atlanta School of Sociology.

Morris demonstrates that it was not just Du Bois who was unable to claim rewards relative to White sociologists but that historically Black institutions such as Atlanta University were unable to lay claim to rewards relative to White institutions like the University of Chicago as well. Du Bois advanced the discipline with groundbreaking empirical and theoretical techniques. Despite this, his contributions to the discipline were marginalized by and credited to White sociologists (Morris, 2015). Correspondingly, research grants and other resources flowed to these sociologists and their institutions, namely, the University of Chicago, as opposed to the historically Black spaces actually responsible for these innovations.

Taking the organization-as-social actor approach to inequality, then, helps us recognize that race operates on numerous levels. Educational organizations are especially illustrative examples in that, by definition, they structure who gets access to social and economic rewards. When resources such as prestige or funding map onto the racialized contours of the population that an organization serves, identifying how that organization became a racialized social actor can help us pinpoint how inequality is produced in ways that go beyond the characteristics of individuals.

### 3 | RACE AND STRATEGIES OF ACTION

Once we envision organizations as racialized social actors, we can begin to understand how this condition leads to particular strategies of action. Swidler (1986) proposed that culture or the beliefs, rituals, language, and so forth that prevail within society, provides people with a means to organize their action toward life goals. Culture from this perspective provides people with a toolkit (Swidler, 1986). People then choose the appropriate tool (e.g., the right words, a certain religious principle, etc.) as they seek to achieve their goals, solve life's problems, and navigate their daily environment.

Scholars have adapted Swidler's framework to think through the ways in which the beliefs, rituals, and language that constitute culture influence organizations (e.g., Weber, 2005). Like those focused on the consequences of culture for the individual, the question of how culture provides organizations with a set of actions or tools to pursue goals and formulate strategies animates this perspective.

Appropriating this framework to understand how the beliefs, rituals, or language regarding race affect organizations and the organizing process holds promise. Do the meanings and practices associated with race provide organizations with a repertoire of strategies? Indeed, the literature offers examples where organizational actors specifically incorporate race into their mission to challenge racial inequality and the regimes that support it. Two examples, both dealing with Black social movement organizations demonstrate how this process works.

At their core, social movement organizations seek to redistribute society's rewards (e.g., wages, political representation, and educational access) in a more equitable manner (McCarthy & Zald, 1977). As discussed in the previous section, the reward structure within the United States favors White Americans. Black social movement organizations form to contest and alter this state of affairs. Not surprisingly then, race plays a crucial role in the

strategies pursued by these groups and the solutions developed to combat inequality. In both scenarios discussed below, specific elements of American culture such as the belief that Blacks are inferior to Whites and the practice of excluding Blacks from key institutions informed organizational strategies of action.

The Black Panther Party's work on sickle cell anemia clearly exemplifies how race and the desire to combat racism informs strategies of action (Nelson, 2011). The Black Panthers' sickle cell program educated the Black community about the disease and offered genetic testing and counseling to community members. Importantly, the Black Panthers used this effort to offer an alternative to racially charged narratives that positioned Black Americans as biologically inferior and thus responsible in some way for their susceptibility to sickle cell anemia. Moreover, the Black Panthers highlighted differences in public sympathy and government funding for this disease when compared to those that primarily affected people of European descent such as cystic fibrosis.

In this case, a racialized worldview informed the medical-related work that the Black Panther Party conducted. With a belief that racism generated health inequalities, the Black Panthers created strategies to highlight the disadvantages Blacks faced and to undo these disadvantages at the grassroots level. Examining social movement organizations such as the Black Panthers illustrates how race informs and gives meaning to organizing activities.

By chronicling the efforts of Black activists pushing for the creation of Black studies programs as well as the university responses to this, Rojas (2007) sheds light on how race informs organizational actions of multiple parties. On the one hand, the historical exclusion of subject matter on peoples of African descent led Black activists to view universities as complicit in the marginalization of Black Americans. This understanding of race led the activists to demand that universities incorporate new subject matter focused on Black culture and life. On the other hand, universities seeking to quell student unrest over issues of race that included enrollment, housing, and other aspects of university life often saw the creation of Black studies as a potential solution.

Research at the intersection of race, social movements, and organizations highlights how multiple actors use ideas about race to pursue varied ends. Bell (2014) argues that much of the organizational transformation in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century is the result of Black Americans incorporating Black Power movement ideals into work, educational, and social spaces. The language, values, and norms of the Black Power movement provided the means to challenge White racism within the organizations and professions exerting control over Black communities (Bell, 2014). Rather than conceptualizing race solely as a property of individuals, future research should strive to incorporate the idea that organizations strategically position themselves within racialized landscapes. That is, in addition to a focus on outcomes that affect people, analyzing racial inequality requires looking at the behaviors and experiences of organizations as well.

## 4 | AN ORGANIZATIONAL AND INDIVIDUAL APPROACH TO RACIAL INEQUALITY

We began the paper with the claim that most research on racial inequality and organizations focuses on people. As such, we recognize that most of the interest in this area will remain on individual-level outcomes no matter how persuasive our arguments. We offer a path that combines our interests in racial inequality at the organizational level with those more concerned with the individual level. Still, our claim regarding the need to recognize organizations as racially stratified social actors situated within inequality regimes proves useful.

Much of the research on individual-level outcomes takes place within "mainstream" organizations, that is, the type of organization most likely to privilege Whiteness. For instance, Rivera (2012) investigates the process of "cultural matching" during hiring and its consequences. Along with, and sometimes more so than, competency, evaluators used cultural similarities to assess job candidates. Over half of the evaluators Rivera interviewed rated cultural similarity, particularly with regard to leisurely pursuits, as the most important hiring criteria ahead of analytical thinking, communication, or other skills more closely related to the actual work.

Rivera's (2012) findings have important implications for understanding how the privileging of Whiteness can occur within organizations. In their search for cultural similarities, decision makers have the capacity to reproduce racial inequality by favoring candidates who have been exposed to middle class, affluent, White activities and leisurely pursuits. High-achieving minority candidates who have not been exposed to such activities may be especially limited by the "cultural matching" processes.

Given this, researchers interested in individual-level racial inequality may find it useful to study organizations that do not privilege Whiteness. Despite being situated within inequality regimes that make it difficult for these organizations to claim rewards, have organizations that do not privilege Whiteness been successful at addressing race on an individual level? Do such organizations generate less racial inequality for their participants?

Here again, Historically Black Colleges provide a useful example. Despite being situated within an inequality regime that makes it difficult for them to claim rewards relative to traditionally White ones, Historically Black Colleges have proven success in producing highly qualified and skilled graduates. Research suggests that Black students at Black colleges have higher academic achievement (Allen, 1992), more social engagement (Allen, 1992; Fries-Britt & Turner, 2002; Outcalt & Skewes-Cox, 2002), and higher levels of satisfaction (Outcalt & Skewes-Cox, 2002) than their counterparts at White colleges. Organizations such as Historically Black Colleges point toward the possibility of isolating the policies and practices that cause racial inequality within traditionally White organizational settings to persist.

Those wanting to better understand how organizations generate individual-level racial inequality may find it useful to study organizations known to produce contradictory results. For instance, Juris' (2008) investigation of the U.S. Social Forum highlighted the necessity of intentionality—a direct focus on incorporating the voices of working class people of color into the Social Forum—as a key organizational practice that created an inclusive space. Such research shows the benefit and promise of identifying practices and configurations that lessen racial inequality within organizations. Studying organizations that do not privilege Whiteness can shed light on how and why those organizations that do continue to generate racial inequality.

## 5 | CONCLUSION

An organization's ability to carry out its stated goals is subject to the material (e.g., people and capital) and social (e.g., prestige and status) resources at its disposal. For most organizations, these resources remain outside of their control. Consequently, the inequality that operates among organizations means that some will have better access to the material and social resources necessary to survive. Inequality makes it so that organizations cannot effectively promote their rights, acquire resources, or express their distinctive capabilities (Scott, Ruef, Mendel, & Caronna, 2000). Doing each of these things is essential for organizations to adapt to their environments and perpetuate themselves.

Additional research is necessary to know how racial inequality operates at the individual and organizational levels. Many scholars have invested their time and effort into investigating the causes and consequences of inequality-making processes within organizations. This has produced a body of research that affects the way academics and organizational actors have understood intragroup relations. We have argued that in addition to examining the routines and cultural scripts that stratify people within organizations, researchers should broaden their analytic scope to include higher level social actors.

We focused on organizations that have racial missions to illustrate many of our points. However, the ubiquity of racial inequality means our argument extends to organizations and institutions that are not explicitly racial in orientation. For instance, during the 1980s, police departments across the nation received federal cash incentives for prioritizing drug-law enforcement (Alexander, 2010). The narrative of the violent, Black criminal, wreaking havoc on American cities and police departments as protectors animated these incentive programs. Police departments secured rewards—federal grant money, military grade equipment—by reorienting how and whom they policed



(Alexander, 2010). In contrast to the underfunding of historically Black colleges, police departments, who in theory, lack explicitly racial goals, used racialized ideas to secure more resources.

Racialized inequality regimes prevent certain organizational actors from successfully laying claim to the rewards that they are due. To the extent that sociologists have always argued for understanding context in relation to outcomes, it follows that researchers should be more purposeful in analyzing how inequality regimes operate at multiple levels of analysis. By focusing on how racialized ideas affect the functioning and logic of organizations, we hope scholars will better identify the complicated ways in which racial inequalities manifest, not just between people, but also among organizations.

## NOTE

<sup>1</sup> Neo-institutional theory suggests that many organizations choose to symbolically comply with the state or more powerful counterparts by enacting policies and strategies that will not lead to substantive change. This gives more powerful organizations the impression that their demands have been met while protecting the weaker organization's autonomy (Meyer & Rowan, 1977).

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**How to cite this article:** Wooten, M. E., and Couloute, L. The production of racial inequality within and among organizations, *Sociology Compass* 2017;e12446. doi: 10.1111/soc4.12446

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