RACE AND ORGANIZATION THEORY: REFLECTIONS AND OPEN QUESTIONS

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ABSTRACT

For years, critics have warned that organizational research does not take race seriously enough. Fortunately, this situation has improved as scholars in the 2000s and 2010s have produced scholarship that explores how race defines and shapes organizations. In this chapter, I briefly review the intersection of the sociology of race and institutional theory and suggest questions for future research.

Keywords: Race; organizational theory; institutional theory; social change; racism; hierarchies

INTRODUCTION

Pick up any classic text in organization theory and you will be hard-pressed to find a sustained discussion of race. For example, the "Orange Bible" of neo-institutional theory, DiMaggio and Powell's (1991) *The New Institutionalism in Organizational Analysis*, does not examine race in any of its selected articles. The situation is the same in other key texts, such as W. Richard Scott's (2001) *Institutions and Organizations*, James March's seminal *The Handbook of Organizations* (1965), or Howard Aldrich's (1999) *Evolving Organizations*. The first edition of *The Handbook of Organizational Institutionalism* (2008), one of the most comprehensive reference tomes in recent organizational science, barely mentions race. This is not to say that organizational scholars have ignored race, but racial dynamics have not been incorporated into the theoretical edifice that underwrites the sociology of organizations, public administration, or management theory.

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Fortunately, the situation is changing. Since the late 1990s, scholars in multiple disciplines and subfields have begun to seriously consider how race should be integrated into the theoretical canon of organizational studies. At first, scholars examined race in very particular contexts, such as affirmative action policy or school curricula (e.g., Binder, 2002, Skrentny, 1996). Later, scholars began to consider how race might be viewed in a more systematic way, as a basic ingredient for individual organizations and entire organizational fields (Emirbayer & Desmond, 2015, Wooten, 2015). Recently, there have been attempts to provide a synthesis of how organizational scholars should think about race, with race being a key factor in how organizations are created and act, and how institutions are implemented (Ray, 2018; Ray & Purifoy, forthcoming; Rojas, 2017; Wooten & Coloute, 2017).

This chapter takes Rojas (2017) as a starting point. In that article, I offer an overview of institutional theory and how race should be considered as a fundamental element of institutional theory. Drawing on recent work in social movement theory and neo-institutionalism, I argue that race is a set of socially constructed categories that are "inputs" into institutional processes in a recursive fashion. Sometimes, organizations and fields are built to reify and solidify racial hierarchies. In other cases, organizations can change racial hierarchies.

The present chapter will cover a few topics. First, it will describe and elaborate the basic model of race, fields, and institutions. Examples from the literature will be used to illustrate key concepts. Second, this chapter will emphasize open questions and avenues for exploration. The first question will be whether race can be "expunged" or otherwise removed from organizations. I will refer to various areas of organizational research, such as studies of affirmative action and studies of elites, where this is a central issue. The next question that will be considered is the rigidity of racial hierarchies in organizational fields. How easy, or hard, is it for organizations to change their position in a racialized field? Third, I will consider the question of racial contention within organizations. Under what conditions might race-based movements in organizations be successful? This penultimate section will delve into recent work on race-based movements in education, the corporate sector, and other fields to develop hypotheses about the conditions that facilitate challenge. The conclusion of this chapter discusses how organizational scholars can address long-standing concerns about race in sociology and related social sciences.

RACE, FIELDS, AND INSTITUTIONS

If one were to distill the essence of modern work in the sociology of organizations, it would be something like this: organizations are collectives of actors who are constantly negotiating their place and position in a larger "field," which structures opportunities, provides templates for legitimate actions, and otherwise provides resources for that organization. Most sociologists, then, see actors within organizations as being embedded in a particular type of social structure called a "field," and the stable patterns of behavior within a "field" are called "institutions" (Fligstein & McAdam, 2012).

There is no single accepted definition of the field and its functions. Scholars working in the tradition of organizational demography and population ecology might see the "field" as those organizations competing over the same resources and customers (Hannan & Freeman, 1977). The social network analyst would see the field as a population of organizations densely filled with social bonds between individuals and various bureaucratic agencies (e.g., Laumann & Knoke's, 1986). Early institutionalists see the "field" as the collection of organizations, stakeholders, audiences, and regulators who define what is acceptable or legitimate for an organization (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983). More recent work in institutional theory shifts the focus to the individual who can strategically and purposefully manipulate the field ("institutional work"), or they may shape it through social interaction ("inhabited institutions") (e.g., Lawrence & Suddaby, 2006; Lawrence, Suddaby & Leca, 2011).

In modern organizational theory, scholars are also interested in the microlevel and interactional elements of the field. Here, the work of Bourdieu (1977) and Fligstein (2001) are helpful. Bourdieu's field theory is not identical to that employed by organizational theorists. Bourdieu, for example, did not consider how organizations compete for resources or how organizations must contend with isomorphism processes. However, Bourdieu did appreciate that organizations, or populations, are "domains of action" where there are "rule of the games," both formal and informal, as well as resources and rewards that help actors attain their goals and improve their prestige or status. In his terminology, a field is defined by a specific set of attitudes or social psychology ("habitus") and resources in the field ("capital"). Thus, in the Bourdieusian theory, society is composed of multiple domains of action (e.g., finance, professional athletics or art), and each domain has its hierarchies, "native mindset," and resources that help people attain status or power in that domain.

Fligstein, in a series of articles and later a book coauthored with Doug McAdam (e.g., Fligstein, 2001; Fligstein & McAdam, 2012), approaches Bourdieusian field theory from a more contemporary perspective. While Bourdieu tended to focus on reproduction of status, Fligstein and McAdam focus on contention. People can use the resources of the field to challenge hierarchies within the field. Fligstein, inspired by Bourdieu and others, also focuses on social skill, the ability to strategically manipulate the field in one's own self-interest. He provides many examples, such as the politician's ability to use the right rhetoric to frame issues or relying on social ties to find economic opportunities. What Bourdieu, Fligstein, and McAdam draw attention to is that fields are not merely impersonal entities that constrain organizational behavior; they are entities that can be shaped, used, and undermined for individual goals.

This contemporary view of organizations as entities embedded in fields informs many of the literatures that populate modern organizational sociology. For example, the vastly growing scholarship on institutional work, for example, focuses on how individual actors create, erode, or otherwise build institutions that regulate organizations in fields (Lawrence & Suddaby, 2006; Lawrence, Suddaby & Leca, 2011). A number of studies that examine how social movements affect organizations adopt a field-level perspective, where movements are

actors that try to alter the power dynamics within fields (e.g., Heaney & Rojas, 2015; McAdam, Tilly, & Tarrow, 2003; Rojas, 2007).

From the contemporary field theory perspective, race has an intuitive role. Race is a category that is a fundamental element of any "institution." As rules are created to manage organizations, they reflect the racial categories of the broader society. Interactions inside organizations reflect racial hierarchies, and organizations choose audiences and stakeholders in ways that reflect race. Educational research, for example, describes in vivid detail how students are often treated in ways that reflect race and how entire educational systems are segregated along racial lines.

A second less noted but equally important dynamic is how organizational and institutional processes themselves can change racial categories and hierarchies in society. For example, in an attempt to measure the population, governments can create or suppress racial categories. In the United States, there have been two recent instructive examples. The first concerns "pan-ethnicity" – the grouping of related ethnic groups into a larger category (Mora, 2014). The push for Latino pan-ethnicity emerged from multiple organizational processes, such as the desire for Latino activists to create a large unified block of voters. That is, they believed that having a political category for Mexicans, Puerto Ricans, and other South and Central Americans would lead to more influence. One way they advocated this was by having the US Census, and other institutions, incorporate the broad "Latino" category in its official statistics. This, in turn, promoted the popularity of a new ethnic category. A similar thing has happened with regard to bi- or multiracial people (Morning, 2012). Throughout most of American history, having parents of differing races was not considered a separate racial or ethnic category. However, when the US Census decided to have a biracial category, biracial became a more popular self-designation.

The image I present here is not static or unidirectional. I do not claim only that "organizations are racialized," or only that organizations sort, or segregate, along racial lines. Rather, I suggest that the processes of racial construction and institutional evolution grow together and mutually influence each other. The core lesson for scholars of race is that organizational fields are where the "rubber hits the road," the place where individual actors must decide how and when racial categories must be consulted when creating organizations. Another important lesson is that organizational processes themselves may be key factors in changing racial hierarchies. For organizational scholars, a crucial insight is that race is ever present and it is a form of status that can be accepted, institutionalized, or rejected. The challenging of race in organizations entails an explicit recognition of how race is implicitly factored into the daily life of organizations and a willingness to mobilize in response.

Recent scholarship describes how this process may play out in complicated and unexpected ways. Smith's (2016) recent book, *Reparation and Reconciliation: The Rise and Fall of Integrated Higher Education*, for example, describes how private philanthropic groups in the late nineteenth century attempted to bring Black students into American colleges and universities. Smith contends that this ultimately failed because of pressures from within

colleges and outside of colleges. For example, using case studies of schools like Oberlin College, Smith is able to argue that there was internal resistance to Black students at formerly White schools. Theoretically, this is important because it shows that the "inputs" into organizations aren't enough to change the racial stratification found within organizations or fields. There are multiple constituencies within organizations that interact with each other, which can amplify or suppress social change. Curington (2015) makes a very similar point in a discussion of how racial distinctions emerge from interlocking "projects" in fields as varied as education, religion, and the law.

OPEN QUESTIONS

In this section, I will briefly consider three questions that follow from the theoretical framework presented in the previous section. The first question is how difficult is it to remove, expunge, or seriously alter racial differences in organizations? This question is interesting from a theoretical perspective. If racial categories are so basic and fundamental to interaction, then one would suspect that they would be particularly difficult to alter. Thus, the racial aspects of organizations should be very "sticky." The question is also fascinating from a policy perspective because a great deal of effort has been expended implementing policies in the United States that attempt to remedy racial discrimination experienced by African Americans, Latinos, and others.

Affirmative action policies have a complex history that is difficult to summarize in this brief chapter, but I will note a few major points and focus on the United States (see Skrentny, 1996, and Berrey, 2015, for extended discussion). First, affirmative action policies are not uniform and they vary widely in their definition and implementation. As used by the Kennedy administration, which originated the term, affirmative action merely meant that Federal departments should take positive steps to make sure that an individual's race was not a consideration in hiring. Later, affirmative action referred to other policies that tried to make sure that underrepresented groups were present in various organizational settings, such as workplaces and schools.

Second, affirmative action has been a widely contested policy. It is constantly challenged in the courts and by conservative social movements. In the courts, affirmative action policies in colleges and universities have been the subject of nearly constant litigation (Berrey, 2015). Plaintiffs tend to argue that any consideration of race violates the race neutrality of the state. Defendants, often universities, claim that abolishing affirmative action would result in a situation where entire sectors of the American population would be absent from various institutions. American courts have, over decades, allowed a modest level of affirmative action on the grounds that institutions have goals that supersede race neutrality. For example, American courts, on multiple occasions, have agreed that it is valuable for a college to have an ethnically and racially diverse student body because it enhances the educational experience (e.g., Warikoo, 2016). Students, according to this doctrine, benefit when they meet and interact with a diverse range of students.

Third, there has been a somewhat successful effort to circumvent and de-institutionalize affirmative action programs (e.g., Hirschman & Berrey, 2017). For example, some states have passed referenda that repeal affirmative action policies. The most famous case is California's Proposition 209. More recent research examining the policy statements of a sample of 1,000 colleges and universities shows a decline in the percentage of schools that claim to use affirmative action policies. The combination of court actions, referenda, and a more general de-institutionalization of affirmative action policies suggests to scholars that an overt and explicit attempt to remedy prior discrimination has had a relatively limited impact. Furthermore, other research indicates that the racial composition of universities and other institutions targeted by affirmative action policies has not changed much (see Kehal, Hirschman, & Berrey, 2018, for preliminary work in this area).

The conflict over affirmative action illustrates how "sticky" racial categories can be within an organizational field. Even though courts have curtailed affirmative action policies in many cases, there is some evidence that organizations have resisted these judicial actions. Black enrollments at selective colleges, for instance, have remained flat at 6 percent. There is also anecdotal evidence that college administrators at top schools have reformulated admission policies in ways that ensure the diversity of their undergraduate classes.

These studies suggest a series of questions about various attempts to address racial discrimination in organizations. An initial question would be: under what conditions do actors within organizational fields vigorously attempt to institute and enforce policies of remediation such as affirmative action? Are some fields more amenable to these policies than others? For example, it is notable that the most active arguments for affirmative action come from higher education and the courts have asserted that some level of affirmative action is desirable to maintain an ethnically heterogeneous student body. What is it about higher education, as a field, that allows this argument to be accepted, not merely among educators but also within the legal system? Are similar processes to be found in other fields? A second question concerns the reversibility of social change. Affirmative action policies were attempts to shift the demographic composition of schools and workplaces. But, as noted earlier in this chapter, there is substantial evidence of de-institutionalization. What aspects of fields allow the de-institutionalization of racially egalitarian policies to occur?

A second set of questions concerns organizational status. It is very often the case that organizational fields develop systems of status, where some organizations consistently are wealthier, more visible, and are seen as generally more desirable than others (Podolny & Philips, 1996). Higher education, for example, is an organizational field replete with all kinds of rankings so that one can judge the relative position of universities, various academic programs, and even specialties with individual programs. A common observation is that organizations whose identity is tied to lower-status ethnic groups tend to have lower status. In higher education, historically Black colleges and universities tended to be seen as second-tier institutions and many state agencies and nonprofits have spent considerable resources trying to remedy that situation. Institutions dedicated to

Native American populations tend to be small and have limited resources (Cole, 2011).

Even though there is a fair amount historical scholarship on these types of institutions, there is very little that discusses when organizations with an explicit racial identity are able to change their position in their organizational field. Returning to higher education, one can ask: When do HBCUs successfully acquire status? It is not known how often, for example, HBCUs move between Carnegie Classification categories, such as "research intensive," that mark high and low prestige colleges and universities. It is also not known how HBCUs are able to change their visibility by attracting students with higher standardized test scores, a factor commonly used to evaluate or rank universities.

In addition to asking about specific organizations moving up and down organizational hierarchies, one could also ask when racially identified organizations improve their status by collaborating with higher-status organizations. For example, recent scholarly work on the Black Congressional Caucus documents the different barriers that African American legislators encounter as they attempt to work with their mainly White counterparts (e.g., Tyson, 2016). Another example comes from the scholarship on the Civil Rights movement that examined the tense relationship between Black political organizations and their White supporters (e.g., Meier & Rudwick, 1973). This example is an exception to a broader observation about research on racially identified organizations – there is little systematic knowledge on the conditions which encourage the bridging of a "structural hole" separating the organizations representing high- and low-status racial and ethnic groups.

The third general topic that I wish to discuss is racially motivated conflict within organizations. This topic has received more attention from scholars. Returning to higher education, there are multiple studies of Black student protest on college campuses (e.g., Rojas, 2006, 2007; Kendi, 2012). There are multiple historical studies of racial tensions within American unions as well (e.g., Quadagno, 1992). One might also describe historical studies of slave revolts as examples of racial violence within organizations such as plantations (DuBois & Garrigus, 2016). Often, these studies situate conflict within organizations as an outcome of inequality within the organization. Simply put, the lower-status groups, at some point, acquire the resources to challenge the incumbents.

CONCLUSION

Two important streams of sociological research have begun to converge. One stream examines how racial categories are infused into a wide range of social interactions. Categories of race might be considered a fundamental feature of social interaction, which means that when organizations emerge, they likely reflect racial distinctions. The other stream of sociological research asks about the meso-level organization of society, especially as expressed in field theory. This stream of sociological research tries to understand how instrumental goals are embedded in larger fields of action and how these fields have their own distinctive processes for creating and transforming social hierarchies. The research

I have discussed in this chapter emerges from the intersection of these two scholarly areas, an area of discourse that tries to understand how organizational behavior and racial categories evolve together. If this nascent area of research matures, we will have a very robust account of how social categories and organizational fields rely on each other for their emergence, growth, and decline.

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