Sociology Compass 10/10 (2016), 918–927, 10.1111/soc4.12406

On the Job: White Employers, Workers of Color, and Racial Triangulation Theory

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This article offers that Claire Jean Kim's theory of racial triangulation provides an ideal framework to study workers of color, the racialization of their labor and the ways in which actual and potential employers neglect and discriminate against these workers. Specifically, the piece determines that racial triangulation theory bolsters analysis of race-based power that employers exert in the construction and maintenance of racial inequality in regard to management of labor and employment possibilities for workers of color. A triangulated approach allows for a sharp focus on employer engineered labor market inequality as they oversee, hire, and refuse to be racially inclusive in hiring practices. Most significantly, racial triangulation theory addresses the forces of racial inequity within the meso-level of U.S. social structure when applied to study of organizational dynamics such as workplaces. I open the article by assaying historical and contemporary studies on workers of color to illustrate white employer domination and the ways in which workers of color are referenced to each other as inferior and superior workers. Subsequently, the article looks to fresh analytical directions in which sociologists can evaluate racism as a triangulated, multidimensional social force in the workplace and other social contexts.

Introduction

In 1999, political scientist Claire Jean Kim conceptualized the social terrain upon which US racial groups interacted and lived out their lives on as a "field of racial positions." The positions approach proves instructive and offers a helpful tool to move sociological theory on race and ethnicity beyond a binary comprehension, which was a primary objective of Kim's analysis. The binary approach frames race relations and inequality as occurring between whites and various groups of color in a straightforward and un-nuanced manner. Consequently, within a binary scheme, racial inequality is exhibited with white occupation of a hierarchical space above all groups of color, who occupy multiple spaces below. Kim's triangulated model presents the sociohistorical landscape in which the process of racial triangulation occurs (Figure 1).

To comprehend racism and race relations as a triangulated process makes way for a comparative, and thus more robust, study of how racial inequality comes into effect and is maintained. Kim argues that on a field of racial positions, Blacks are insiders in US society – in many ways, their presence and right to be in the country is unquestioned – but they are persistently mistreated as a socially constructed inferior racial group. Conversely, Asian Americans are outsiders but, in comparison with Blacks, attain a position as a superior group but remain commonly perceived and constructed as foreigners. Thus, Asian Americans and Blacks experience conflictive group relations with each other; meanwhile, whites remain socially superior insiders (2000). This mode of interaction between all three racial groups triangulates Asian Americans as a moderately ranked racial group – better than Blacks but never as good as whites. The bottom line is that Asian Americans and Blacks experience inequality between each other, tension with each other while simultaneously serving as referents to each other. Moreover, the triangulation of race relations allows whites to maintain their superior position within the multiracial United States

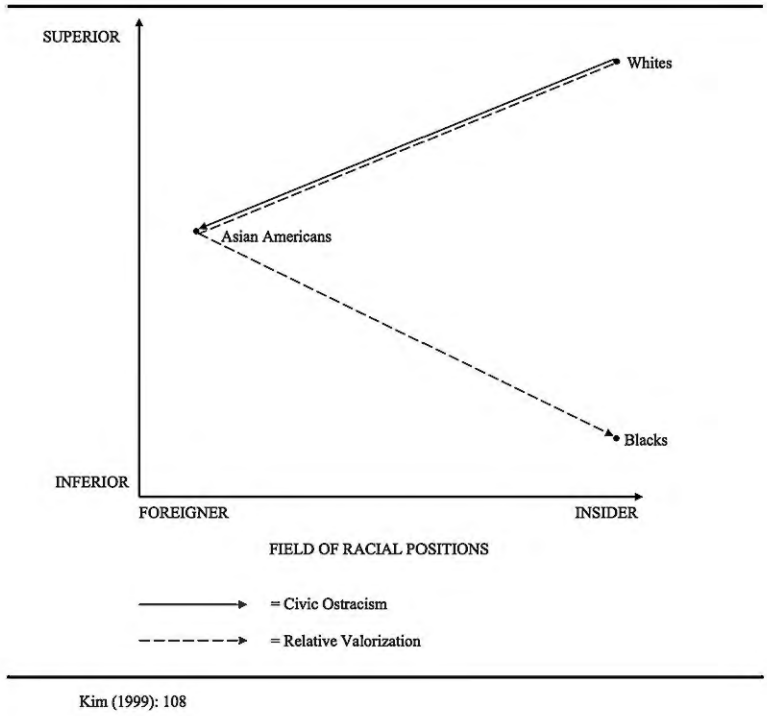

Figure 1 Kim's Field of Racial Positions

Two social processes fuel racial triangulation. The first process is what Kim terms "relative valorization." Geometrically, triangles are shapes in which one point can be located and ascertained in reference to two other points. Sociologically, relative valorization plots these points and enacts a comparison of racial groups to each other that ranks them. Therefore, the racial position of one group is more accurately located when we see the other two groups to which they are being triangulated. Moreover, the triangle, if you will, sets up lines that tell us where the boundaries are drawn and allows the placement of other racial groups within what is essentially not only a field of racial positions, but a field of racial stratification.

Relative valorization is bonded (Kim 1999:107) "analytically and functionally" to another social process known as "civic ostracism." Relative valorization enforces comparative inequality in that some groups of color are deemed more legitimate than others. Still, even sociologically superior groups of color such as Asian Americans are excluded from full participation in society as first class citizens. To civically ostracize people is to relegate particular racial groups from equal participation in the national polity. See Kim's prototypical diagram of the field of racial positions and the outcome of racial triangulation.

Most significant for this paper, Kim's theory explains how the phenomenon of racial stratification is no mere matter of circumstance, but is often intentionally fostered by a wide range of powerful white dominated social institutions and actors. Kim (Ibid.: 106) categorizes these institutions and actors as "architects of racial inequality." The list includes (Ibid.: 107) "White elected officials, journalists, scholars, community leaders, and business elites and so on." To this list, which Kim never claims as an exhaustive series, we should add the role of employers as architects of racial inequality.[1] Indeed most people spend a considerable portion of their lives engaged in paid labor to attain sustenance. Furthermore, the workplace atmosphere and employment possibilities that workers of color encounter in a racially

stratified society, such as the United States, provides an ideal social landscape in which to employ the Kim model of racial triangulation. While scholars have engaged in such research pursuits, several untraveled directions and uninvestigated settings remain to be fully excavated and sociologically analyzed.

Recent sociological literature on race and ethnic inequality verifies the persistent discrimination to which groups of color are subjected in various spheres of US social life. People of color continuously struggle to access adequate housing (Ross 2011), education (Green 2010) and jobs (Pager, Bonikowski and Western 2009, Widner and Chicoine 2011, Pager and Pedulla 2015). The latter is the focus of this paper in regards to how racial and ethnic minorities are mistreated on the job, relegated to "dirty and dangerous" jobs and frequently disallowed entry to certain kinds of jobs. I argue that the theory of racial triangulation is useful to interpret the workplace and work opportunity inequality that workers of color confront in the US labor market historically and currently. I offer that we must draw our focus to employers – including those actors who make hiring decisions but may not by owners – and utilize racial triangulation theory to assay employers' impact on job market inequality for two central reasons.

First, at its broadest level, racial triangulation theory provides an invaluable tool as the concept necessarily revises W.E.B. Du Bois' (1996) presentation of the color line as the premiere global challenge in the 20th century. For 21st century United States of America, sociologists of race require a theoretical apparatus that examines the nuances of a national workforce that is increasingly composed of immigrants and US born workers of color. Second, application of racial triangulation theory to hiring practices and treatment of workers of color provides assessment of racial inequality within the meso-level of social structure via analysis of discrimination within organizations such as workplaces. The sociology of race and ethnicity contains numerous structural approaches to studies of racism and racial discrimination (Bonilla-Silva 1997, Oliver and Shapiro 1997, Shapiro, Meschede, and Osoro 2013). Additionally, particularly within the sociology of education, studies on racial microaggressions have emerged that delineate the existence and impact of everyday racism (Solorzano 1998, Pérez Huber and Solorzano 2015, Louis et al. 2016). Racial triangulation theory helpfully addresses the forces of racial discrimination at play in the intermediary layers of US social structure.

Racial hierarchies and the racial binary

Historical and sociological studies, particularly on Asian and Latino workers, deliver important lessons on the consequences of racial triangulation. Without employment of the model itself, these studies foreshadowed – and I would argue provided, in part, the necessary empirical evidence – to build a theory such as racial triangulation. Specifically, historiographical and sociological analyses observantly problematize the racial binary with their nuanced presentation of racialized occupational stratification. Racial hierarchical studies proved to be fertile scholarly ground upon which to move racial stratification analysis in directions that afford comparative study and offer foundational support for investigation of racial inequality in a multiracial society. Miri Song's (2004: 861) assessment of US-based racial hierarchy scholarship deduces that "white Americans are at the top of a racial hierarchy, African Americans at the bottom (with sporadic reference to Native Americans as an equally oppressed group), and groups such as Asian Americans and Latinos as somewhere in between." No matter the order in which groups of color are layered, racial hierarchy analysis proffers that whites are able to maintain their position atop the hierarchy and reap the benefits of white supremacy (Feagin 2006 & 2010).

One historiographical conclusion offers that even within an arduous labor environment, some workers of color – in this case Chinese workers – rose above other workers of color to procure more desirable jobs and form a "labor aristocracy" (Friday 1994). In his study of late

19th century California, Tomás Almaguer's historical sociological monograph (1994) ascertained that Mexicans were regarded as a more palatable group of color by dominant whites. Also in a historical sociological vein, Jung (2006) and myself (Cruz 2010) disseminate the specific types of jobs that groups of color could attain and the way in which such occupational segregation engendered race and class inequality *between* workers of color. Many of these studies illustrate the tight link between race status and the type of jobs deemed appropriate for particular racial groups.

The racial hierarchy approach explains how and why workers of color are stationed at particular point of a racial hierarchy at a certain historical juncture. However, the model put forth by hierarchical analysis models racial inequality as operating in vertical alignment. The analyses take a necessary step but provide limited assessment of the lateral shifts that groups can make either on their own or as a result of how white employers triangulate workers of color. In some respects, the hierarchical approach mirrors the binary approach in that racial groups may move in only one of two directions: up or down. The result is a claustrophobic framing of race inequality as groups are posed as solely existing in vertical alignment. Racial triangulation theory supplements the hierarchical approach with its interpretation of interaction between white employers and workers of color as occurrences on a field and thereby enables a multidimensional study of racial inequality.

That the racial hierarchy literature is heavily comprised of primary source driven sociological studies seems to be no accident. Much of the scholarship moves beyond the binary comprehension of race by reaching back temporally in order to demonstrate that, indeed, a binary actually never existed. By carrying out this scholarly venture, historical sociologists move toward comparative race and ethnic analysis. Furthermore, historical methodology in sociology pinpoints the historical roots of contemporary racial equality and provides rich theorization of the longitudinal process of racial subjugation.

The cited studies in this section illustrate the link between racialized workers and their place within labor markets. Clearly, working people of color as a source of cheap and vulnerable labor proved fortuitous to mostly white employers who could, for example in the midst of World War Two in California, threaten to deport Mexican workers and intern Japanese farmers (Cruz 2014). Furthermore, workers of color were not only vulnerable but also occupationally stratified into specific types of jobs – this predicament seems especially damaging to women of color, particularly Black women and Latinas, who carry out reproductive labor (Duffy 2007). For example, scholarship on women of color demonstrates the occupational segregation, which they confront as employees of white owned households (Ibid.). Mignon Duffy takes an intersectional approach to unpack how the interactive effect of race and class is occupational segregation for Black and Latina domestic servants who carry out the "dirty work" of household labor. Earlier scholarship by Evelyn Nakano Glenn (1992) illustrates how white women who were "ladies of the house" would do labor but operated at a higher level as female heads of household, who could lord over their employees of color. Therefore, women of all racial groups worked within households but white women employers were able to triangulate the labor and their employees in such a way that white labor never engaged in "dirty work" that was unseemly and thus acted to distinguish their acts of labor from the tasks carried out by women of color.

Blueprinting the structure of racial positions

Studies that detail the outcomes of intersectionality, particularly the intersection of race and class, are common sense approaches in studies of stratification. I add that intersectional analysis of race and class can potentially offer more insight if we distinguish between cause, effect, and

how said effect models the social world. Thus, a focus upon intersections of race and class inequality provides a rich examination of how stratification is produced. The effect is embodied in the outcome from the intersection, which for the purposes of our discussion is seen with the emergence of occupational and racial segregation. Last, we must conceptualize the model produced from this causal relationship. Racial triangulation allows sociologists to carry out the latter project with its field of racial positions and ability to tackle complex interactions within a multiracial society both historically and in the contemporary period. A triangulated approach charts the map and allows us to see the blueprint of racial inequality's form and shape within the US's social architecture. Moreover, racial triangulation theory – and the approach offers the opportunity to assemble multiple models – delivers a method by which we can observe the degrees of inequality between racial groups and the mechanisms that drive that stratification.

Hence, the study of employers' intents and usage of variant forms of racialization, as "architects of racial inequality," proves to be a fertile area of concern for racial triangulation studies. Moreover, by taking this turn to understanding employers' motives and schemes when stratifying workers of color, we remain aligned with a conceptualization of race as a "category of practice" in which workers of color and their bodies, who are often laboring in difficult conditions, are representative of an (Hancock: 428) "embodied *history* of meaning and social relations." That is, racialization, race, and racism are phenomena that cannot be solely evaluated as concepts or variables. They are *occurrences* that structure racial groups into specific positions, and they must be understood as continuously undergoing a formation process. Moreover, a specific group is advantaged by the social arrangement of racial inequality. In the United States, the advantaged group is the white majority, and I urge sociological scholarship to hone in on employers as playing a central role in building the architecture of inequality that directly benefits white workers in accessing jobs and concomitantly undergirds white supremacy. For example, when previously noted vulnerable and deportable Mexican workers in historical sociological scholarship were relegated to low-level jobs agricultural jobs (Cruz 2010), employers often reasoned that they were naturally equipped to do the work. The historical take is crucial because the continued hierarchical arrangement and triangulation of workers of color by white employers continues to this day.

Marta María Maldonado (2006: 357) writes in her study of white agricultural employers and their Latino employees that white agricultural employers invoke "seemingly non-racial language" and engage in the "mobilization of essentialized notions of culture." Additionally, Maldonado (2009) substantiates that employers buy into the idea that their Mexican employees possess a race essence while certainly never indicating that they themselves are being racist or are social actors who also "practice race" and constitute a socially superior racial group. Moreover, Maldonado presents a model of racial triangulation in which groups of color are referenced against each other based on race, citizenship, and how long a particular worker has been settled in the United States. She illustrates the ways in which white employers valued Mexican immigrants as workers but the most recent arrivals were racialized as the best workers before they would eventually become (Maldonado 2006: 356) "half-ass Americanized." The white employers are able to deploy a field of racial positions without ever having to take to the field, so to speak, themselves. Indeed they are the architects of it and benefit by categorizing workers into groups borne from their perceptions and stereotypes.

Networks, jobs, and triangulation in the workplace

Even when workers of color can avoid manual labor and attempt to access upward social mobility, they encounter the social reality of triangulated racial inequality. For example, Thomas Macias (2006) interviewed later generation Mexican Americans, many of whom most likely

descended from Mexican agricultural laborers, in Northern California and Phoenix. Many of the interviewees possessed post-secondary degrees and worked white-collar jobs. Even after doing so, their white colleagues and supervisors racialized them as essentially foreign and inherently steered toward certain types of behavior. Sarah Damaske's study (2009) offers an indication of the social environment such upwardly mobile Latino and African American workers may have experienced as university students. In her ethnographic venture, Damaske uncovers how a university career center is a site that exhibits the advantages for white women and international students over US born Black and Latino students. Time and again, corporate recruiters ascertained US born students of color as unfit and (Ibid.: 409) "hiring representatives sent implicit signals… suggesting that…African Americans and Latinos were *not* preferred by the local labor market." In this case, students of color faced a deeply rooted social inequality that triangulated them as more "outsider" and "inferior" as compared with other potential hires – even those student colleagues who were born outside of the country.

Studies, such as those produced by Macias and Damaske, delineate the ways in which workers and students of color, even in white-collar professions or when they are aspirants to such professions, are blocked from occupational pathways to upward social mobility. I contend that a necessary and ensuing research step is to apply triangulation theory to these contexts of racial inequality. In doing so, analysis of power dynamics in the workplace is uncovered rather than solely making calls to be more multicultural or practice cultural competency. Certainly, the implementation of inclusive hiring protocols would benefit workers of color, but evidence is available and more analysis is necessary on employers' and prospective employers' roles in (1) asserting their power over workers of color by excluding them from job offers and (2) how workers of color are comparatively assessed in reference to each other, particularly in white collar job settings where their numbers are often scant.

When workers of color gain entrée to upwardly mobile jobs and opportunities, they enter into a social structure that does not greet them as groups of people who belong. Hirsh and Lyons (2010) indicate that vague job standards are frequently applied to job performance for workers of color, who are thereafter infrequently on the receiving end of clear dictates as to how to accomplish their work. Beddoes, Schimpf, and Pawley (2014) focus on women professors in their study, but attest to and confirm the fuzzy standards that minority workers – even well educated employees such as professors – confront in their jobs. Moreover, employees of color almost never work under racial and ethnic minority supervisors; thus, they are more likely to perceive discrimination in the workplace as their co-workers and supervisors tend to be mostly white. As to the occurrence of triangulation, which is not how Hirsh and Lyons frame their analysis, we witness its occurrence as perceptions of workers of color run along racial lines. Hirsh and Lyons (2010: 288) conclude that:

> African American and Hispanic workers perceived much more racial discrimination on the job than did white workers: however, we found no statistical difference between the odds of perceiving discrimination for Asian and white workers.

The conclusion, unintentionally, puts on display the triangulated racial positions of variant workers of color and their white counterparts. More specifically, we are offered a pinpointing of Asian American workers' relative valorization as more desirable workers and potentially equal to whites in comparison with Black and Latino workers.

Throughout the 20th century, whites' attitudes and beliefs on issues of racial minorities and racial equality steadily reflected a movement toward more progressive dispositions (Bobo 2001). Yet, groups of color apply for jobs in a US labor market that reflects an extremely closed architecture in which they have been unable to access greater opportunity (Tomaskovic-Devey et al. 2006). Mcdonald, Lin, and Ao (2009) draw the link between higher status jobs and the ability to

locate the most desirable jobs; this structure of opportunity proves most advantageous for white males. Furthermore, their findings suggest that research on job leads for racial and ethnic minorities may need to distinguish between (Ibid: 398) "structurally advantaged ethnic groups (e.g. Asians)" and "structurally disadvantaged ethnic groups (e.g. Native Americans)." A triangulated framing of the US's multiracial labor force and the job seeking process is necessitated by such an observation. That is, in moving beyond the binary, sociological analysis must bring to the fore the differentiated forms of discrimination that each group of color confronts. Furthermore, the contradiction of more progressive racial attitudes with continued labor market discrimination must be reconciled.

Triangulating in new directions

To hone in on differentiated forms of discrimination accorded to different racial groups builds a pathway to conceptualizing racial discrimination as a phenomenon that exists in multiple forms (Jung 2002). Xu and Lee (2013) apply racial triangulation theory to survey data and comparatively evaluate how Blacks and whites perceive Asian Americans. The authors also touch upon Hispanics and suggest that they share a similar heritage with Asian Americans as exploited immigrant laborers, who encountered widespread racist sentiment. Historically, both groups traveled from afar to labor in the United States; an effort to parse out and analyze how their employers treated their Asian and Latino workforce is of paramount importance. Indeed, racial triangulation theory requires further application to the historical in order to shed light on the contemporary. Xu and Lee (2013: 1366) astutely describe the most invaluable contribution of racial triangulation theory in communicating that the model exhibits how "racial stratification is multidimensional and that *a racial group can be rated high on one dimension and low on another.*"

I have contended that central actors, most importantly white employers, remain understudied as architects of the triangulated racial inequality in both historically oriented and contemporary studies. Xu and Lee's excellent contribution extends usage of triangulation theory to attitudes about Asian Americans, but their analysis – while path-breaking – is limited to survey research questions and responses. Fortunately, we have observed the emergence of studies that tackle racial inequality within a multiracial society by using other methods. These analyses complement social statistical data with rich ethnographic data. Moreover, they utilize racial triangulation theory in such a way that the model offers a potential route out of the field of racial positions toward racial equality.

For example, Kimberly Kay Hoang (2015) richly describes and explicates what she coins to be a "triangular system of labor relationships" in Vietnamese owned nail salons in California. Hoang explains how race and class relations are mutually constitutive; moreover, those relations are steered in various directions according to the type of interaction that occurs between racial and ethnic minorities. The complex dynamics between owner/client, owner/worker, and worker/client come together to form (Ibid: 114) "three legs of a triangle." That triangle forms the field of racial positions in which inequalities are on display. The field is continuously refurbished and reinforced by the structural conditions of the majority-minority neighborhoods in which the nail salons are situated.

Studies of the sort that Hoang provides are nascent analyses that utilize racial triangulation theory to study inter-minority relations seemingly without whites anywhere in the picture. Yet, the disempowering force of white supremacy serves to build and maintain these fields even when the interactions are between groups of color. Kathleen S. Yep's (2012) study of basketball players of color peers backs and moves the literature up until the present day. Yep substantiates how whiteness, even among athletes of color, is utilized to valorize particular Black athletes vis-à-vis other Black athletes. Yep (Ibid: 977) writes that "liberal multiculturalist discourse" is

employed "to manufacture the appearance of sport as post-racial and to strengthen white privilege." Indeed most basketball players are Black Americans, but even then these athletes are triangulated by "white normative subjectivities" into a "racial triangle of hero, threat and novelty."

Last but very crucially, Erica D. Chutuape (2016) originally presents how triangulation by racial minorities, as they possess and display agency, build tighter bonds between groups of color. In her study of Filipino American students in New York City, Chutuape describes a "racial continuum" in which the students she interviews envision themselves as a bridge between Black and white students in the school. Therefore, the students recognize the racial inequality and racial distance within the school's student population. The analysis suggests that those gaps can be bridged. Thus, while racial triangulation theory offers the opportunity to strengthen analysis of racial inequality, which I argue in this paper. I conclude by noting that racial triangulation theory also potentially points the way to the racial equality that remains so evasive in contemporary United States of America.

Acknowledgement

I thank Kazuyo Kubo and Charlotte Ryan for their critical and insightful comments on early drafts of this paper. For coming to the rescue when I needed help on technical matters, I am grateful to Jacqueline DiPersio and Nikki Rivera.

Short Biography

Adrian Cruz's work is focused on comparative racial formations, collective action, immigration, and working people of color. His published scholarship is drawn out of research conducted on the California farm worker movement. Currently, he is revising a book manuscript titled *Racialized Fields: Asians, Mexicans, and Undocumented Workers in the Making of the California Farm Labor Struggle*. Additionally, he has commenced a new line of investigation on racial attitudes and beliefs about immigrants as they are expressed in the virtual social world. Cruz is presently an Assistant Professor of Sociology at the University of Massachusetts-Lowell. Before his time in Lowell, he taught at the University of Redlands in California and Dickinson College. He holds a BA in English from the University of Texas-Pan American and a PhD in Sociology from the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. He can be contacted at adrian_cruz@uml.edu.

Notes

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[1] Claire Jean Kim's list of "architects" includes the "business elite," who are often employers. However, this paper defines employers as not only owners of large-scale enterprises, but also small business owners and managers/supervisors.

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