

RACE, ORGANIZATIONS, AND THE  
ORGANIZING PROCESS

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RESEARCH IN THE SOCIOLOGY OF ORGANIZATIONS  
VOLUME 60

# **RACE, ORGANIZATIONS, AND THE ORGANIZING PROCESS**

EDITED BY

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# RACE, ORGANIZATIONS, AND THE ORGANIZING PROCESS

Melissa E. Wooten

## ABSTRACT

*To date, most research that takes up race as a theoretical or empirical category remains focused on uncovering the processes that lead to disparities in individual-level organizational outcomes such as pay and promotion. We aim to shift analytic attention away from people to organizations. This volume represents a collection of nine chapters that investigate how race shapes organizations and an organization's ability to get the cultural, political, and material resources it needs to survive, that is, the organizing process. This interlocution argues for the importance of understanding organizations as social actors that also contend with race. Additionally, the introduction provides an overview of the chapters in the volume by briefly summarizing each contribution and highlighting the connections between them. The introduction closes with a discussion of the direction future research studies in this area might take.*

**Keywords:** Race; organization theory; racial inequality; race and organizations; racialized organizations; race and social movements; organizational inequality

## INTRODUCTION

Typically, the role of race in sociology is considered from the perspective of organizational members or customers whose race affects their experiences and outcomes. From this vein, scholarly contributions consistently document racial disparities in key organizational sites. Take the experiences of Black, Latina, and Native American women in hospital settings, for example, who experience higher rates of medically unnecessary cesarean deliveries than their White and Asian counterparts (Roth & Henley, 2012). Not only does this unequal

treatment expose these women to a higher risk of maternal death, it also straddles them with higher medical costs should they survive a procedure they did not need. This trend reemerges in both criminal justice organizations, where Black and Latino youth receive harsher sentences than White youth charged with the same crime (Irvine & Canfield, 2017), and education where Black girls receive harsher discipline than their White school peers, even when displaying the same behaviors (Epstein, Blake, & Gonzalez, 2017; Morris & Perry, 2017).

Existing research makes clear that race plays a central role in structuring individual-level organizational outcomes. Yet, are there other ways to think about the relationship between race and organizations? Less often do we consider how the racialized nature of organizations themselves may reproduce and reinforce racial hierarchies, especially in terms of organizational practices and structures. For instance, what should we make of findings that indicate historically Black colleges pay higher underwriting fees to issue bonds than their traditionally White counterparts (Dougal et al., *forthcoming*)? If this were an individual-level effect, that is, if Black people had to pay more to secure credit than equally situated White people, sociology would have much to say. But when we shift the level of analysis, sociology has less insight to offer into how race affects organizations in part because the discipline rarely considers race as a characteristic that organizations possess and therefore might be judged.

We know that the history of organizations is replete with examples of their racialization and their role in reproducing and reinforcing racial hierarchy. Consider how the logics and technologies that inform current American business practices trace their origins to the enslavement of African people (Beckert & Rockman, 2016; Williams, 2015). The ideals of risk and liability guiding the finance industry gained “their clearest articulation in the maritime insurance cases resulting from disastrous slaving voyages” (Beckert & Rockman, 2016, p. 9). Such dynamics do not only have an historical precedent. When we consider the contemporary scandals regarding the disproportionate amount of predatory lending in Black communities (Rugh & Massey, 2010; White, 2016), it appears that the logics informing current business practices within the financial industry remain racialized.

For much of American history, where one stood in relation to organizations said much about one’s position within a hardening racial hierarchy. Although most organizations no longer have explicitly racist goals, research shows they continue to function within a racialized social system that limits the emotional displays of Black employees (Wingfield, 2010), restricts the status of minority-serving organizations (Damaske, 2009), and segregates Blacks and Whites into different occupations (Stainback & Tomaskovic-Devey, 2012). Technologies and processes that produce and reaffirm racial difference remain embedded within and among organizations today.

We rarely study organizations with this reality as our starting point. When asking the fundamental question of why organizations take the shape and form they do, few organization theories situate race as integral. When we understand that many of our contemporary organizational forms found their roots in systems of racial domination (Beckert & Rockman, 2016), the sociological analyses we embark upon shifts; we begin to develop a clearer picture of race as a social

structural phenomenon that shapes the inner workings of organizations, rather than as just a characteristic of individual beings.

## RACE AS A CORE ORGANIZING PRINCIPLE

The chapters in this volume take the fundamental nature of race to organizing processes as their starting point. We take seriously the proposition that organizations represent social actors distinct from people. To be clear, we are not suggesting that organizations could exist or perpetuate themselves without people. In taking the stance we do, we aim to highlight that the energy exerted by people to ensure that organizations receive resources is done so collectively, in the name of organizations. Similarly, organizations exhibit much different levels of social power and are subject to unique sets of rules that set them apart from people. This volume seeks to explore the push and pull of social resources, rules, and power among organizations, and the extent to which race fundamentally shapes these processes.

The chapters in this volume grew out of the *Race, Organizations and the Organizing Process* mini-conference held at the 2017 Eastern Sociological Society Annual Meeting in Philadelphia, PA. Presenters at this conference responded to a call to consider what race means when extended beyond people; how race becomes infused in everyday organizational, institutional, and market activities; and the processes that racialize organizations. Though empirically diverse, the desire to treat the organization as a distinct social actor that can escape the consequences of race no more easily than people linked presenters at this conference.

The conference brought together strains of research across education, social movements, economic sociology, political sociology, the sociology of knowledge, and organization theory. This mirrors a recent trend where scholars across subfields have grappled seriously with the notion that race permeates all aspects of organizational life (Wooten & Couloute, 2017). Research in this terrain demonstrates that stakeholders view organizational spaces that serve racial minorities as less prestigious than those serving primarily White constituencies (Damaske, 2009; Wooten, 2015) and that innovations generated at minority-serving institutions are credited to traditionally White ones (Morris, 2015). Here, race is situated as a characteristic that stratifies organizations in much the same way as size or status does. Studies in this area also document when and how organizational actors use race to stake out positions and pursue goals (Bell, 2014; Nelson, 2011; Rojas, 2007; Smith, 2016). Race is understood as a material and cultural element that organizations can deploy to mobilize support and resources.

Operating in such varied theoretical traditions often makes seeing the connections between works difficult. As Rojas notes in this volume, we currently lack texts that reconcile and coalesce discussions on race within organization theory. Consequently, on first glance Nelson's (2011) study of the Black Panther Party's health activism and Morris' (2015) study of W.E.B. DuBois' position within American sociology may seem unrelated. However, both illustrate the centrality

of racial subjugation to medicine and academia respectively. Though situated within different literatures, these strains of research illustrate that organizations, not just the people in them, exist within a racialized inequality regime (Acker, 2006) that structures their attempts to gain access to the social, financial, and political resources necessary for survival.

Each chapter included in this volume fleshes out how race intersects with organizational and institutional processes. As a whole, the chapters provide insight into how race forms the basis of the strategies that organizations enact, how race informs the logics that structure the everyday activities of and within organizations, and how race animates the processes used to distribute organizational rewards.

### **RACE AS A FUNDAMENTAL ELEMENT**

Each chapter in this volume treats race as a fundamental element of the environment that shapes organizational possibilities. Rojas' reflection on organization theory sets the stage for their arguments. Rojas distills the essence of modern organization theory as a body of work that sees organizations as collective actors that must constantly negotiate a place within a field (Fligstein & McAdam, 2012). As entities embedded in fields, we might expect more scholarship that unravels how "the processes of racial construction and institutional evolution grow together and mutually influence each other" and organizations. Yet, despite this seemingly intuitive connection, Rojas concludes that few field studies integrate race as a theoretical or empirical construct. He argues that race is a set of socially constructed categories that are a fundamental element of any field: the rules that manage organizations reflect society's racial categories, interactions inside organizations reify and challenge racial hierarchies, and an organization's choice of audience reflects race. Rojas offers compelling evidence as to how race structures fields and organizational life.

#### *Race as Strategy*

Organizations must get material and cultural resources on a continual basis if they hope to survive. Material resources can range in form from human to financial. A for-profit company needs to get employees and customers whereas a non-profit organization like a church needs to get followers or congregants to perpetuate itself. Organizations need capital in the form of cash, credit, or equipment. Organizations even need political resources such as a favorable legislative environment or endorsements from important figures.

Research from the organizational institutionalism perspective argues that conformism secures access to resources (Dimaggio & Powell, 1983; Meyer & Rowan, 1977). Research from the institutional work perspective argues that actors construct and reconstruct their environment on a routine basis (Lawrence & Suddaby, 2006; Lawrence, Suddaby, & Leca, 2009). But what does it mean to conform to prevailing myths about race? Furthermore, how might actors create a racialized institutional environment and why would they work to



do so? Three chapters in this volume tackle such issues and show us how actors use organizations to conform, shape, and take up institutional understandings of race to their own advantage.

Smith develops racial activation theory and in doing so dissects the conditions whereby organizations promote, utilize, and advance meanings about race for strategic purposes. She is particularly interested in scenarios where activating racial themes makes it possible for organizations to align themselves with audiences and markets. Like Rojas, Smith situates race as a construct that constitutes fields and institutional spaces. Smith then theorizes the conditions under which organizations leverage racial meanings and how this in turn embeds race onto organizations. She builds this theory by showing how race has been activated within American higher education, offering many intriguing examples along the way. For instance, the American Missionary Association (AMA) placed Blacks, Whites, men, and women within coeducational spaces to encourage the equal status interactions essential to creating a well-functioning, multiracial democracy. Part of the broader anti-caste movement, the AMA placed interracial contact at the center of its mission to eliminate race as a marker of status following the US Civil War. But the AMA did not exist within a vacuum. Enacting this strategy required support from funders and potential students. As the networks cultivating their work diminished, the AMA shifted in kind. That is, the AMA activated race differently, reorienting its mission and strategy to better match the environment. The organization abandoned its anti-caste, coeducational strategy in favor of one that mapped onto the hardening race and gender boundaries that distinguished higher education funding streams.

In relying on higher education, Smith contributes to a long history of using colleges and universities to deepen the theoretical underpinnings of organization theory (Bastedo, 2012). As Smith argues, because they operate between institutional fields (Khurana, Kimura, & Fourcade, 2011), civil society organizations such as schools connect across a wide variety of institutions and are therefore well positioned to normalize rules and scripts (Bartley, 2007) about race. The two chapters that follow further our understanding of how organizations operating at the interstices of various fields – political and movement organizations – use race as an organizing principle.

Like Smith, de Leon examines how organizations activate, or in his case articulate, race for strategic purposes. De Leon uses the US Secession Crisis to investigate the competing visions of White supremacy put forth by political organizations. Just as earlier work from Smith (2016) reminds us that various strategies to achieve racially integrated education existed in the nineteenth century, de Leon's study highlights the variety of strategies that political parties were willing to pursue to extend slavery and White supremacy. It's only as we look back that the South appears unified in its stance. During the crisis, the Whigs, the political party representing the largest slaveholders' interests, actively argued that staying within the Union was the best strategy to ensure slavery's preservation and by extension White supremacy. Naturalizing racial and class interests toward a particular vision that married White supremacy and African slavery to seceding from the Union was a strategy successfully pursued by

another political party, the “Southern Rights” Democrats. The Whigs ultimately bowed to this competing philosophy following a political defeat. de Leon’s study contributes to sociological analyses of the US Secession Crisis (e.g., Moore, 1966) by focusing on the sequence of events and the political organizations that naturalized race and class interests toward leaving the Union, emphasizing the institutional work required to bring about this outcome (Heaphy, 2013; Lawrence & Suddaby, 2006).

The participants in Walters’ study inherited the racially divisive educational and political landscape examined by Smith and de Leon. Knowing this helps us appreciate the true difficulties inherent in interracial collaboration that Walters analyzes. Here, the high-stakes terrain of charter school expansion in Massachusetts provides a context to investigate how race shapes interracial social movement organizing. Walters brings together racial formation and resource mobilization theories (McCarthy & Zald, 1977; Morris, 1984; Omi & Winant, 1994) to understand how movement organizations use campaigns as racial projects to create, inhabit, transform, and destroy racial categories. Walters’ analysis of two competing movement organizations – one in favor of expanding the number of charter schools and the other in favor of keeping the current limits in place – shows that both sides tried to legitimate their work by making appeals to racial equality and justice. Yet, only those working to keep the current limits on charter schools in place developed racially consistent resources related to participants, framing, funding, and connections. Importantly, this consistency generated trust among those working to limit charter school expansion. In many ways, Walters’ participants embodied the philosophy that harkened back to the early work of the AMA profiled in Smith’s chapter. Creating trust among Blacks and Whites was essential to the anti-caste philosophy, and coeducational schools were a site of experimentation on this front. Walters’ analysis draws attention to the conditions that led to meaningful collaboration across racial boundaries, suggesting that when the right conditions exist race can serve as a unifying strategy within and among organizations.

### *Race as Logics*

The institutional logics literature is a natural home to scholarship concerned with analyzing how race influences organizational-level outcomes. If ideas about race exist “out there,” an institutional logic perspective can help us understand how they manifest within organizations. Friedland and Alford (1991) argued that each institution has a central logic consisting of material practices and symbolic constructions that animate individual and organizational behavior. Thornton, Ocasio, and Lounsbury (2012) pointed to the role of organizational and individual-level processes by which agents reproduce and transform logics. Importantly, this literature provides a link between higher-level belief systems and individual action within organizations.

Unpacking the central logic of race within the American context reveals a set of practices and symbols that reify White supremacy. For much of their history organizations faced no penalty for excluding Black workers (Branch, 2011).

Even contemporarily, wage inequality is largely explained by the exclusion of Black workers from good paying jobs (Tomaskovic-Devey, 1993). Social, political, and economic organizations have been historically biased toward Whites (Katznelson, 2005; Omi & Winant, 1986), and Whites within organizations continue to seek the social closure necessary to maintain their advantage (Tomaskovic-Devey, 2014).

Two chapters presented here offer further insight into how the central logics of race infiltrate organizations. One chapter focuses on a context where participants ignore race, preferring to enact color-blind principles. By contrast, participants in the other chapter quite consciously structure opportunities along racial and ethnic lines. Despite these differences, across the chapters we are presented with scenarios where regardless of whether participants ignore or incorporate race, inequality results. Consequently, we learn that the central logics of race work to provide White employees with better career opportunities and enable professionals working with primarily Black and Latinx men to downplay the effect of race.

Couloute's investigation helps us understand how race-neutral ideologies penetrate organizations and motivate people within organizations to adopt particular orientations toward their work. Using ethnographic and observational techniques, Couloute shows how color blindness operates within the prison reentry complex in Connecticut. Recidivism scholarship largely focuses on program evaluation to understand what kinds of reentry programs keep people away from further contact with the criminal justice system (Petersilia, 2004; Seiter & Kadela, 2003) or attempts to identify the type of life events and transitions that help people desist from further criminal activity (Giordano et al., 2002; Laub & Sampson, 2003; Lebel et al., 2008; Maruna, 2001). Couloute challenges the individual and programmatic narrative within the reentry literature by situating reentry as a field-level process whose logics are quite consequential.

Seen as a leader in the prison reform movement, Connecticut is an ideal case. It's a success story on the one hand. Yet, interviews with Connecticut reentry professionals draw attention to the race-neutral or color-blind (Bonilla-Silva, 2003) framework these actors use to organize their work. While at times, these professionals willingly concede that socioeconomic class influences reentry prospects, they demonstrate less willingness to concede that race might matter too. This occurs despite the racial demographics of the ex-prisoner population: two-thirds of those incarcerated in Connecticut identify as Black or Hispanic. By and large Couloute shows that his participants construct reentry as a meritocratic process, regardless of the racial disadvantages experienced by ex-prisoners. Couloute takes care to analyze how the macro-structures of reentry influence these micro-level logics the individual professionals bring to bear on their work. The institutions guiding reentry encourage professionals to adopt a color-blind as opposed to a color-conscious orientation to their work. Accordingly, getting professionals to consider whether and how race determines reentry prospects is not a matter that can be solved by imploring individuals to change their mindset.

Sociological research highlights the inequality that exists in service provision. Communities with large percentages of Black and Hispanic individuals have fewer service providers when compared to majority White neighborhoods (Allard, 2009). In essence, those people who may need anti-poverty social services such as employment assistance the most are least likely to be in close proximity of them. Couloute's study shows how inequality runs deeper. Even when in minority communities, these service providers may utilize logics ill-suited to the task of interrupting unequal opportunities. While Couloute placed focus on the ways that logics structured professionals' understanding of service recipients, Abad's investigation shows how racialized logics structure opportunities among service providers.

Abad, like Coloute, seeks to connect macro to the micro. In doing so, Abad helps us understand how racial categories influence the tasks employees are expected to take on and complete. Previous scholarship in this area suggests organizations incorporate racial and ethnic minority group members to interface with other racial and ethnic minorities or to perform racialized labor (Collins, 1997; Lewis, 2000; Skrentny, 2014). Abad understands this practice as an ethnoracial logic that organizes work according to assumptions about the inherent racial/ethnic knowledge that an employee possesses. She then seeks to understand how using this logic perpetuates racial inequality. The prevailing logic within immigrant services in a suburban Illinois setting holds that shared background between provider and recipient is desirable. As a result, work within this field gets organized around racial categories. College- and non-college-educated Latinx workers are placed on the frontlines and expected to interface with Latinx immigrants. Despite their advanced degrees and ability to navigate complex bureaucratic procedures, college-educated Latinx workers rarely find their way into managerial roles. They are tethered to the community they serve. Comparatively, college-educated White workers take on managerial roles in part because of their ability to slough off frontline interactions with immigrants to their Latinx coworkers. Here, service providers, White and Latinx, accept the racialized disadvantages facing the immigrants receiving services as they underappreciate how race also shapes their ability to traverse their own organizational hierarchies.

### *Race as Process*

What are the processes, implicit or explicit, ideological, legal, or technocratic, that lead to racial inequality within American organizational spaces? We live in a moment where decisions regarding credit worthiness, recidivism, health risk, and employability are increasingly determined by computerized algorithms. Investigative reports and scholarship on the racialized assumptions built into these algorithms continue to emerge (O'Neil, 2016). Likewise, sociologists have a long-standing interest in understanding whether and how the tools used to mete out rewards within organizations disadvantage racial and ethnic minority group members.